

Bible and video games: An inquiry into an academic terra incognita

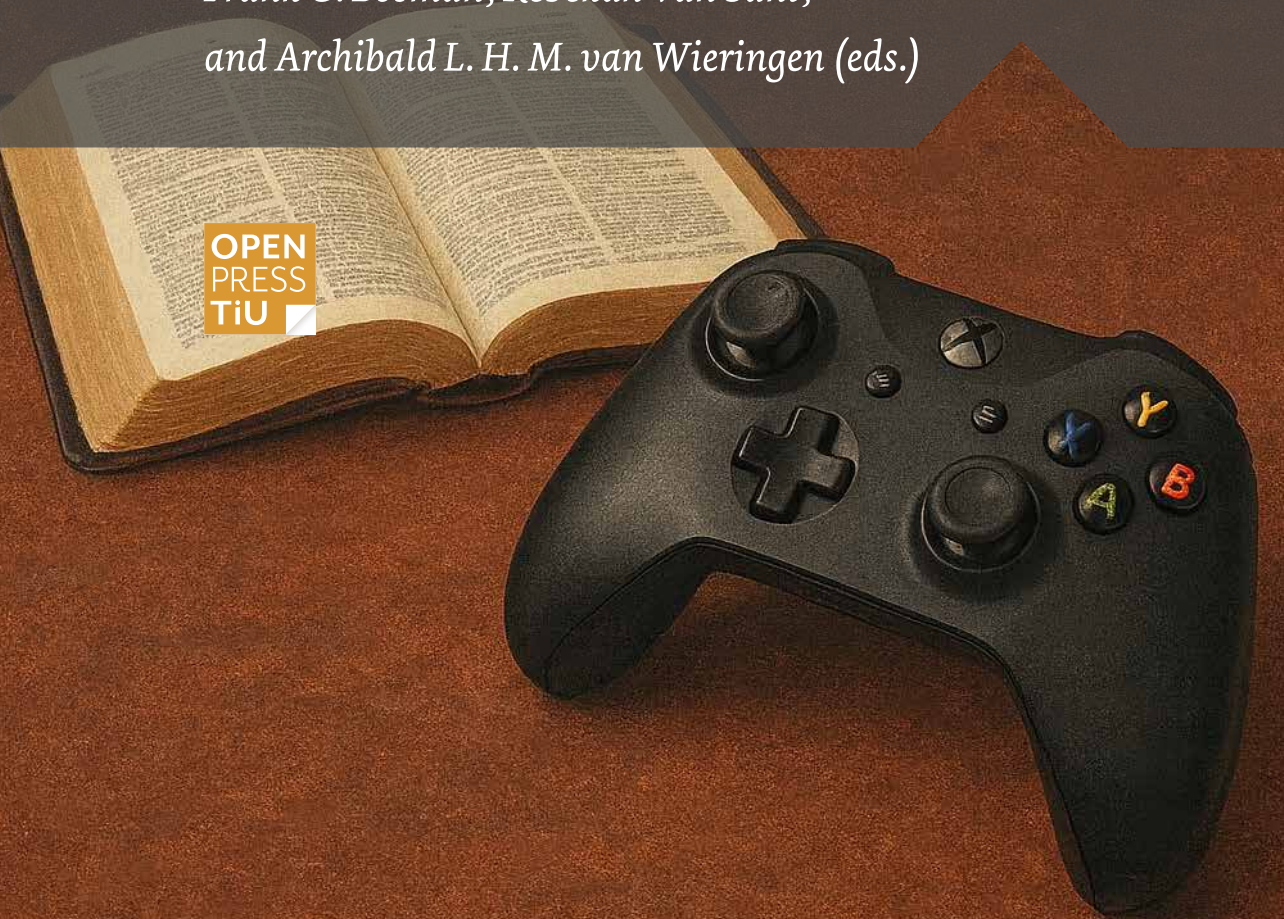
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BIBLE AND VIDEO GAMES

AN INQUIRY INTO AN ACADEMIC
TERRA INCOGNITA

*Frank G. Bosman, Rebekah Van Sant,
and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen (eds.)*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

.....

Introduction	6
<i>Frank G. Bosman, Rebekah Van Sant, and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen</i>	
Playing the Tree of Wisdom	12
<i>A theological inquiry into the Wisdom Tree Game Library</i> <i>Frank G. Bosman and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen</i>	
Jerusalem, City on a Silent Hill	52
<i>Haunted Spaces of the Latter Prophets and the Video Game and Film Franchise</i> <i>Brandon R. Grafius</i>	
A New Exodus and Its New Homeland in Isaiah and Metro Exodus	68
<i>Sehoon Jang</i>	
‘By the Home World I Hope to See One Day’	88
<i>Biblical Themes of Exile and Return in Mass Effect</i> <i>Rebekah Van Sant and Frank G. Bosman</i>	
Religion and the Bible in Cyberpunk 2077	106
<i>Rebekah Welton</i>	
The Bible Game	134
<i>An Oral History (interview)</i> <i>Robert Denton Bryant, Les Pardew, and David Todd</i>	
Gameplay, Biblical Text, and What Drives the Prophet	154
<i>How Students Turned Call Narratives into a Video Game</i> <i>Richard J. Bautch</i>	
Personalia	164
Index of References	166
Index of Video Games	170
Index of Modern Authors	174
Colofon	178

INTRODUCTION

*Frank G. Bosman, Rebekah Van Sant,
and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen*

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Video games and Bible are an odd couple to say the least. Not because there is no Bible to be found in games, on the contrary. In *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) we find a complex reference to the Exodus story, delivered by a blind preacher proclaiming a larger-than-life blend of American exceptionalism and pietist Christianity.¹ In *Metro Exodus* (4A Games 2019), the survivors of a global nuclear war find themselves in a structure called ‘the Ark’.² In *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft 2018), a Christianity-inspired doomsday sect is preaching from *The Book of Joseph*.³ And in *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen and Himsl 2011), an avalanche of Old and New Testament references, including to the Aqedah, help build a seemingly simple religion critical game into an emotional criticism on the psychological effects of (violent) divorces on children involved.⁴

¹ Wysocki, “Critique with Limits;” Bosman, “A Passover Gone Wrong.”

² Bosman, “The Art of Playing God.”

³ Green, “Two Broken Messiahs;” Bosman and Van Wieringen, “Reading The Book of Joseph.”

⁴ Cf. Welton, “Isaac Rebounds;” Bosman and Van Wieringen, “I Have Faith in Thee.”

Again, video games and Bible are an odd couple. Not because there is no religion to be found in video games. A number of monographs and edited volumes prove otherwise.⁵ Craig Detweiler's *Halos and Avatars*, Rachel Wagner's *Godwired*, William Bainbridge's *eGod*, Vit Sisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler's *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* and a couple of others form a new canon on and of themselves in the still emerging field of religion and video game studies. As far as video games and theology are concerned, the academic field still lies almost barren, with the exception of Benjamin Chicka's and Frank Bosman's works.⁶

The reason for the lack of theological analysis of video games is the same as for the lack of studies regarding Bible and video games. Biblical Studies might be among the oldest of the theological disciplines. It encompasses a vast field of inquiry, ranging from research into the Old and New Testament, the world of the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman world, and the Jewish-Rabbinic tradition. The scholarly literature produced by Biblical Studies has grown into what can only be described as a true *mer-à-boire*. By contrast, video games studies is a relatively young, yet rapidly flourishing academic field. And let us not forget, playing a video game is an actual skill one has to master. Virtually everybody can read a novel or watch a movie – with or without biblical references – but not everyone can play video games. And the intersection between people who know their Bible and people who can actually play (and enjoy) video games is a very small one.

Nevertheless, in this edited volume, we have brought together some scholars who bridge the gap between Bible and video games. This edited volume seeks to investigate the relationship between video games and the Bible from a combined perspective, one rooted in both biblical studies and video game studies. Such a dual perspective is rare as indicated above; in fact, this edited volume represents the first significant attempt to present multiple aspects of the intersection between Bible and video games.

⁵ Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars*; Wagner, *Godwired*; Bainbridge, *eGod*; Campbell and Grieve, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*; Sisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*; Bosman, *The Sacred and the Digital*.

⁶ Chicka, *Playing the Others*; Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*.

The combination of Bible and video games manifests itself in several ways. The most obvious example is that of explicitly Christian 'Bible video games'. In their contribution, Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen analyse the 'game library' of the infamous Wisdom Tree game company, known for its stream of low-budget and often low-quality, NES 8, faith-appropriate video games. As in many such cases, these games display a rather superficial appropriation of Scripture, at times marked by elements of fundamentalism and even antisemitism.

Other contributions examine the more subtle ways in which video games incorporate biblical themes. Brandon Grafius explores the *Silent Hill* (various developers from 1999–2025) multimedia franchise and its receptions of biblical descriptions and understandings of Jerusalem. Sehoon Jang turns to *Metro Exodus* (4A Games 2019) and its engagement with the biblical motif of the 'new exodus' of the prophetic literature. The *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007–2012) is examined by Rebekah Van Sant and Frank Bosman with particular attention to its biblical resonances concerning the themes of exile and homecoming. Rebekah Welton researches *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Project Red 2020) in relation to violence and resistance, themes that also recur forcefully throughout the biblical corpus.

Yet the relationship between Bible and video games is not limited to textual analysis of particular titles. Important questions also concern the ways in which game producers themselves engage with these themes. In this context, Robert Denton Bryant contributes an interview with developers Les Pardew and David Todd.

Moreover, the interface of Bible and digital gaming opens up intriguing possibilities for education. Richard Baultch demonstrates how designing a video game can be employed as a teaching method in the academic study of the Old Testament. Assigning students the task of producing a video game as a course project compels them to consider a range of textual dynamics. The medium shift from text to video game obliges students to address narrative gaps and blanks, thereby deepening their understanding of biblical characters and plots.

In conclusion, this introduction provides an overview of the most important scholarly contributions thus far published on the intersection of video games and the Bible, thereby situating this edited volume within an emergent, promising field of study.

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PLAYING THE TREE OF WISDOM

A THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE WISDOM
TREE GAME LIBRARY

*Frank G. Bosman and
Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen*

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In a 2020 online essay, Don Triezenberg provides some advice for Christian parents who might be concerned about their children's video game consumption.¹ Triezenberg, president of the small Christian-game developing West Creek Studios, asks himself the question: "So what are the options for parents who want their kids to stay focused on uplifting images and a God-centred life?" To this he answers, not without some self-interest:

Many parents have simply turned off video games in their household. This is not a bad choice. But many kids, drawn to the forbidden fruit, will find a way to get their fix elsewhere. A better solution is offering them a Christian alternative. (...) In fact, graphics-intensive, Bible-based video games have been known to impress even non-Christian players.

Notwithstanding West Creek's president's self-confidence, "Christian" games do not enjoy wide-spread acclaim in the video game world. On the contrary, re-

¹ Triezenberg, "Video Game Options" [accessed 19 November 2021].

ally. Self-proclaimed Christian gamer Zachery Oliver identifies four problems with the genre's popularity.² Firstly, games for the faithful have suffered from Wisdom Tree's legendary bad games, riddled with "blatant plagiarism of established game ideas (...) [and] illegal cartridge production/lockout overrides", setting a bad reputation for the whole genre. Secondly, Christian games tend to focus almost exclusively on their narrative dimension at the cost of their ludic quality, often resulting in a ludo-narrative dissonance.³ Thirdly, Christian games appear to "exist purely for the purpose of evangelizing," sacrificing all subtleness in the zealous effort accompanying this. And fourthly, the explicit religious self-identification of Christian games scares away (a sub-set of) their supposed target group, the non-believers.

However bad the reputation of Christian games may be, studying the history of the Christian game genre is very interesting: from its birth in the 1980's with games like *Daniel & the Lion's Den* (BibleByte Software, 1982) on the TRS-80 and *Red Sea Crossing* (Inspirational Video Concepts, 1983) on the Atari 2600 VCS, through the well-known Wisdom Tree games like *Bible Adventures* (1991) on NES and *Super Noah's Ark 3D* (1994) on SNES, to modern interpretations like the *Adam's Venture* series (Vertigo Digital Entertainment, 2009–2016) for PC, PlayStation 3 and 4, Xbox One, and Switch, and *LOGOS Bible Video Game* (TeComprendo, 2020) for PC, macOS, and Linux. It provides knowledge and insight about a rather new stage in the cultural appropriation of the Bible, and the development of (parts of) Christianity that wants to integrate the possibilities of the new medium, while negotiating its (supposedly) problematic characteristics.⁴

Communication-wise, any inquiry into the history of the Christian game genre could adopt one of the following three communicative levels (see Scheme #1).⁵

² Oliver, "Christian Games" [accessed 19 November 2021]. See also: Thompson, "When Religion and Games Intersect" [accessed 19 November 2021].

³ Cogburn and Silcox, *Philosophy*, 76–77.

⁴ Copier, Kooijman, and Vander Stichele, "Close Encounters".

⁵ Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art*.



Scheme #1

Schematic overview of the levels of communication according to the communication-oriented analysis methodology.

One could, for example, concentrate on the game-external "real author", the actual developers who made the games, searching for and interpreting their creative intentions and religious motivations (i.e. a historical perspective). Another possibility is to focus on the, equally game-external "real readers" of these games, either the historical ones from the time the game discussed was released, or present-day ones, inquiring in what way the playing of these games has influenced their thoughts, emotions, and opinions of the Bible and/or Christianity (i.e. a social and psychological perspective).

Yet, another possibility is concentrating on the game-immanent communication between the so-called "text-immanent author" and "text-immanent reader", endeavouring to understand what the game is trying to communicate independent of the developers' intentions or the actual players' appreciation of the games in question, while negotiating the characteristics of the multiple intertextual relationships between, for example, the Bible and Bible-inspired games (i.e. a literary perspective).⁶

And last but not least, one could focus on the games' characters, especially the protagonists, since some characters seems to be more in demand than others: Noah, Moses, Joshua, and Jesus himself are especially very popular as titular characters (i.e. a narrative perspective).

In this contribution, we wish to focus our attention on one of the most well-known, even "notorious" developers of Christian games: Wisdom Tree.⁷ It is

⁶ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

⁷ For our first ideas, see Bosman and Van Wieringen, "The Play to Egypt."

impossible to read or look at any list of “Bible games” without at least one contestant from the Wisdom Tree franchise being mentioned in it.⁸ The American company produced ten such games, on different Nintendo and Sega consoles, over the rather short period of five years (between 1991 and 1996). While this Library does not cover the extent of Christian games by a long stretch, it is nevertheless illustrative of the genre that has been so often neglected in the scholarly research into the history of this relatively new medium. After a presentation of these ten games – including their intertextual relationships with various biblical texts – a theological analysis of the Wisdom Tree Library will be provided.

The Wisdom Tree franchise



Image #1

Wisdom Tree franchise’s logo. Copyright: Wisdom Tree.

The history of the company is bizarre but well-documented.⁹ It all started when American game developer Color Dreams succeeded in 1989 in by-passing Nintendo’s “lock out” chip, through which the Japanese company could control the international market for their console: only officially licensed third party games could be played on the Nintendo Entertainment Set (NES). Color Dreams’ solution was technically reasonably impressive, but in practical terms somewhat disappointing, in the sense that the cartridge was known to

⁸ See for example: Hill, “5 Baffling Video Games;” Iannone, “The Most Bizarre Religious Video Games Ever;” Angry Video Game Nerd, “Bible Games;” Angry Video Game Nerd, “Bible Games 2;” Angry Video Game Nerd, “Bible Games 3;” Geek History, “History of Christian Video Games;” Monastery Studios, “Evolution of Christian Video Games” [all accessed 20 November 2021].

⁹ Durham, *Bible Adventures*; Gard and Gard, *Video Games*, 10–12; Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 399–400.

malfunction randomly, and the overall quality of the unlicensed games, like *King Neptune’s Adventure* (1990), *Pestertinator* (1989), *Metal Fighter* (1991), *Crystal Mines* (1989), and *Menace Beach* (1990), were suboptimal to say the least.

In 1991, Color Dreams reinvented itself as Wisdom Tree, focussing exclusively on Christianity-related games. This move was partially inspired to circumvent Nintendo’s wrath: even though the Japanese company had not sued Color Dreams – partially because such a claim would eventually fail – Nintendo forced its retailers into selling only licensed products. Wisdom Tree was supposed to wriggle the company’s unlicensed products into a brand-new market: the Christian (book) stores. This had two advantages: the Christian retailers would not sell official games anyway, and any juridical or public backlash from Nintendo against a Christianity- and Bible-focused publisher would make for very bad publicity indeed. To emphasize its Christian signature Wisdom Tree used, as a logo, a cross from which two branches of green leaves extend (see Image #1), echoing the early Christian identification of the Tree of Life from the Garden in Eden with the cross that Jesus Christ died on.¹⁰

This tactic, motivated by religious and/or commercial motives, resulted in ten commercial releases by Wisdom Tree, the majority being Bible games.

The Wisdom Tree Library

In the overview below, we will discuss the Wisdom Tree games in chronological order.

Bible Adventures (1991)

Bible Adventures (NES, 1991; Genesis, 1995), probably Wisdom Tree’s best-known game, is comprised of three smaller ones: *Noah’s Ark*, *Baby Moses*, and *David and Goliath*. The games clearly borrow many ludic elements from *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, NES, 1988). All games are introduced by means of (parts of) Bible verses, taken from the 1978 New International Version translation, respectively

¹⁰ Dinkler and Dinkler-von Schubert, “Kreuz;” Keble, “Old Testament Types of the Cross;” Behr, “The Cross,” 631.

Genesis 6:12–14, 17, 19 (Noah), Exodus 1:22; 2:1–3 (Moses), and 1 Samuel 17:32–35 (David). The title music is the first part of Bach’s *Jesus bleibet meine Freude* (in English known as *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*).



Image #2
Commercial for Bible Adventures. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

For the release of the game, a commercial was created (see Image #2). We see children playing with a Nintendo. Two women, clearly two mothers, discuss their children’s game behaviour. The first says: “Do you ever worry that they play too much Nintendo?” To which the other replies: “O, not anymore. See, Matt has *Bible Adventures*. They are actually learning Bible stories while they’re playing Nintendo.” One of the children reacts to his friend, supposedly without having followed his mothers’ conversation: “Quick, get that Bible quote!” A voice-over closes the sell: “*Bible Adventure* features three games (...) a must for every family with Nintendo.”¹¹

¹¹ Courtesy to Pat the NES Punk, “Bible Adventures.”

Noah’s Ark



Image #3
Stills from Noah’s Ark. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

Noah’s Ark, the first game (see Image #3, left), consists of several levels of increasing difficulty, in which a white-robed and long-bearded Noah has to stack quite reluctant animals onto his back – two oxen, two cows, two monkeys, two snakes, and so forth – and bring them aboard the Ark. The player can regain its lost life – losing it primarily by touching snakes crawling over the trees – by picking up small Bible verses in the form of a very crudely drawn Torah scroll (see Image #3, middle) that presents the player either with small tutorials (initially) or appropriate Bible verses (later on). This choice of world-building provoked Chris Scullion to comment: “You can restore your health by reading Bible verses, even though the Bible didn’t exist then since Noah was currently living in it.”¹² Eventually, Noah succeeds in collecting all the animals and sets off with his Ark, ending up on the summit of the mountain when the waters subside (see Image #3, right).

¹² Scullion, “Bible Adventures.”

Baby Moses



Image #4

Stills from *Baby Moses*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

Baby Moses, the second game (see Image #4, left) puts the player in the shoes of Miriam, who has to save her baby brother from the Egyptian infanticide. Mechanically speaking, it is more or less the same as in *Noah's Ark*, but with different sprites. Trying to stop the player are animals and Egyptian soldiers, and if Moses touches the water, he is in danger of drowning (see Image #4, middle). This does not stop the game, but prevents the player from getting to the end. The end results – quite disappointingly – with a simple screen saying “Congratulations. You won!” (see Image #4, right).

Whether drowning or not, the game makes a biblical theme explicit: escape through the waters of a swirling river or a devastating sea. The violence of the sea or a raging river is an image for destruction and death. Whoever passes through it reaches the safe opposite side of God's salvation. Individually this happens with Moses, as in this game, and for God's people through its passage through the Reed Sea (Exodus 13:17–14:31), out of Egypt, and through and across the Jordan (Joshua 3:1–17), into the promised land. Noah survives the destructive waters by using the ark God had commanded him to make. This theme of the destructive sea is also used for the prophet Jonah in the biblical book named after him. He will not heed God's voice to deliver the prophetic message to the inhabitants of Nineveh, but flees away in the other direction, into a ship, out to sea. But the destructive power of the sea swallows Jonah and he 'drowns' in the sea where he ends up in the belly of a great fish, which functions as being in the realm of the dead. In Luke 5:1–11 the theme also plays a role in the calling of the first disciples of Jesus. Peter goes the way of Jonah. It is not

that his boat *almost* sinks (as the majority of bible translations render the text), but in the Lucan story he actually descends into the depths, where he comes to the real recognition of his relationship with Jesus.¹³

The similarity of this game to *Noah's Ark*, caused Chris Scullion to observe: “... Mariam has to carry Moses to the end of the river, avoiding enemies, so she can safely put him in a *little ark* [italics FB/AvW].”¹⁴ However, there is no ark at the end of *Baby Moses*: Miriam (= ‘Mariam’), while carrying Moses, just walks off screen to the right, marking the end of the game.

The designation ‘little ark’ is biblically speaking very justified. Noah is not swallowed by the waters because he has made an ark according to God's command. An ark (תֵּבָה) is a box. Noah's ark is in fact a kind of coffin. It is therefore God who closes the ark (Genesis 7:16), for a man cannot close his own coffin.¹⁵ In the visual arts, however, Noah's ark has become a boat, as in *Noah's Ark* (see Image #3, right). Just as Noah is saved by using an ark, Moses is also saved by using an ark, his own little ark. In the visual arts, Moses' ark has often become a basket; but fortunately not in this game.

David and Goliath



Image #5

Stills from *David and Goliath*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

David and Goliath, the third game (see Image #5, left), is a strange combination of the other two, in the sense that the first part tasks the David of the title with collecting his flock while wild animals are attacking it (cf. *Noah's Ark*) and the

¹³ See e.g. Girard, *Les Symboles dans la Bible*, 258–265; Verderame, “The Sea.”

¹⁴ Scullion, “Bible Adventures.”

¹⁵ See Van Wieringen, *Seven Sacraments*, 31.

second part tasks him to fight the Philistines and ultimately Goliath (cf. *Baby Moses*; see Image #5, middle). When Goliath is slain, the player is given a Bible verse by way of the end-screen: 1 Samuel 17:49 (see Image #5, right).

The King of Kings (1991)



Image #6
Still from *The King of Kings* and two pages from the *Instruction Manual*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

The King of Kings, also known under the longer title *The Early Years of the King of Kings* (NES, 1991), is a three-in-one package too, just like *Bible Adventures*, discussed above (see Image #6, left). It is comprised, again, of three games, all taking place – as the longer title suggests – during the early years of Jesus’ life: *The Wise Men* (Matthew 2:1–12), *Flight to Egypt* (Matthew 2:13–15), and *Jesus and the Temple* (Luke 2:21–38).¹⁶ *The King of Kings* resembles *Bible Adventures* in many ways, especially regarding game mechanics and aesthetics, but features a much more “evangelical” ending, in all three cases. The end-screen reads: “Congratulations! You have won! But in order to live a a (sic!) victorious life, you need to give your heart to Jesus Christ. Refer to the end of our manual.” And indeed, at the back of the physical manual (see Image #6, middle and right), we can find the following text, accompanied by quotes of Revelations 3:20 and Romans 10:9–10 (in the translation of the New International Version):

¹⁶ Scullion, “The King of Kings.” 6.

Do you know the King of Kings? Have you entered into a relationship with the living savior? (...) To know Him, you must confess with your mouth, and believe with your heart that He is Lord. (...) He loves you and wants to enter into a covenant with you. Won’t you receive Him into your heart today? Simply pray out loud: Lord, I believe that You died for my sins and rose again from the dead. Forgive me for my sins. Come into my life and be Lord over me. From this day forward I give my life to You. Thank You for my salvation, in Jesus’ name! Amen.¹⁷

Every game also has its own feedback form (found in the manual), in which the players are asked to rate their experiences, not only about entertainment, challenge, graphics, and sound, but also education and biblical accuracy.

The Wise Men



Image #7
Stills from *The Wise Men*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

In *The Wise Men*, the player takes the role of one of the Magi from Matthew’s Gospel, travelling through deserts, cities, and caverns in search of the baby Jesus (see Image #7, left). The appearance of the player’s avatar alternates between sets of two levels. This is presumably connected to the early Christian idea that Matthew’s Magi were three in number and kings by occupation, named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar, and who are traditionally depicted in Christian iconography as having three different ages and three different ethnic backgrounds.¹⁸ The game clearly tries to emulate this, only to result in

¹⁷ The manual is fully available on <https://archive.org/details/king-of-kings-the-nes-hiresscans> [accessed 21 November 2021].
¹⁸ Weis, “Drei Könige.”

ethnically stereotypical aesthetics.¹⁹

The camel the player rides on spits projectiles at enemies, while extra life can be (re)gained by picking up little scrolls – presumably representing Torah scrolls – sending the player to a quiz screen (see Image #7, middle). Answer a multiple-choice question on biblical trivia correctly and the player gains one life extra: these are also represented as scrolls on the screen. This time the King James translation is used instead of the New International Version. Extra points can be gained by collecting bottles of frankincense, myrrh, and gold. During the game, the song *We Three Kings of Orient Are* (1857) by John Henry Hopkins Jr. plays.

When the player has completed the game, a nativity scene is shown (see Image #7, right), including Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, the star of Bethlehem, and a naked little angel. After a couple of seconds, the call to give your heart to Jesus appears.

Flight to Egypt

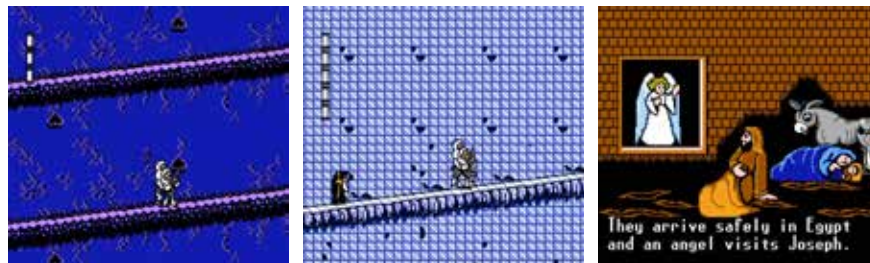


Image #8

Caption: Stills from *Flight to Egypt*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

In this little game, the player controls Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus, all three sitting on a single donkey, slowly climbing and descending mountains, apparently towards the safety of Egypt (see Image #8, left). Snakes (again), boulders, and mountain-goats try to hinder the four, but – like in *The Wise Men* – health can be restored by picking up Torah scrolls and answering questions regarding Bible trivia. To give one example:

¹⁹ Kidger, *Star of Bethlehem*, 166–197.

After Mary and Joseph found out the young Jesus was missing, how many days did it take them to find him?

(Luke 2:46)

[option 1] 777

[option 2] 3

[option 3] 20

In the end, the holy family is shown resting in some sort of building (a stable perhaps). An angel is seen at the window, while the subtitle reads: “They arrive safely in Egypt and an angel visits Joseph” (see Image #8, right).

An interesting detail is, of course, that Joseph is said to have a vision of an angel (Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19), but in Matthew this does certainly not occur on his arrival in Egypt as the video game suggests. Even more interesting, is that one of the enemies the holy family has to overcome, is – according to the manual – a “rabbi”, who “wants to talk, but you must hurry.” The rabbi is dressed in a black robe, carries a wooden stick, and sports a white beard, and is apparently there to hinder the family or even prevent it from reaching its goal (see Image #8, middle). The game allies these rabbis with King Herod and his attempts to murder the child, in fact evoking antisemitic sentiments.²⁰

Jesus and the Temple

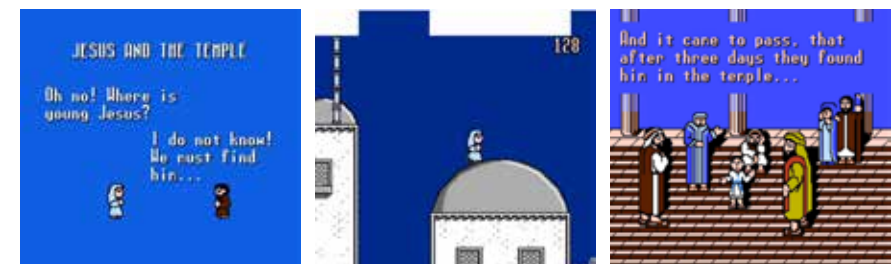


Image #9

Stills from *Jesus and the Temple*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1991).

²⁰ Kampling, “Deicide.”

In *Jesus and the Temple*, Joseph and Mary (see Image #9, left) are looking for their child, who has apparently remained in Jerusalem. Alternating between Mary and Joseph – just like in *The Wise Men* – the player has to cross several levels until the end (see Image #9, middle). The game presents an end-scene depicting Jesus amidst four scribes while Mary and Joseph stand together at the side watching the scene (see Image #9, right). The accompanying text reads: “And it came to pass that after three days they found him in the temple” (Luke 2:46, King James Bible).

Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land (1992)

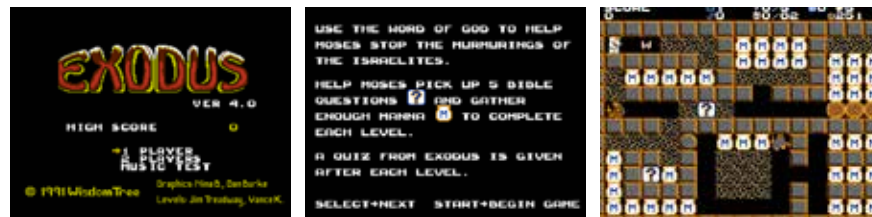


Image #10

Stills from *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1992).

Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land (see Image #10, left), another Wisdom Tree production (NES, 1991; DOS and GameBoy, 1992; Sega Genesis, 1993) is a *Boulder Dash* (First Star Software, NES, 1984) clone, using Color Dreams’ earlier, non-religiously themed *Crystal Mines* (NES, 1989) engine.²¹

When started, the game shows a paraphrase of Exodus 2:23–25; 3:1–9 (see Image #10, middle): “God saw how the Israelites were enslaved and remembered his covenant with Abraham. He chose Moses to lead them to freedom.” The reason for paraphrasing instead of quoting is probably practical in nature: there is a finite amount of room for text on one 8bit screen. The game instructs the player to “use the word of God to help Moses stop the murmurings of the Israelites,” a possible reference to the continuous complaints of God’s people

²¹ Scullion, “Exodus.”

while wandering through the desert (for example the activity of לון, “murmuring” in Exodus 15:24; 16:2, 7, 8; 17:3). In each of the hundred levels, the player has to pick up Bible questions and pots of manna to proceed (see Image #10, right), before the timer runs out.



Image #11

More stills from *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1992).

“Murmurings of Israel” and “Doubting God”, aesthetically resembling blocks of dirt and bush, are removed by one or two “shots” of “spoken Words”, probably suggesting that complaints and doubt can be effectively countered by preaching God’s Word. A “Golden Calf of Sin” (Exodus 32) needs three shots to explode. Four types of enemies hinder the player: Pharaoh’s magicians, taskmasters, soldiers, and sorcerers, and these are either stopped by God’s Word, by an exploding Calf or by falling objects. After each level, five Exodus trivia-questions are asked for extra lives (see Image #11, left), and a devotional picture of the Exodus’ narrative is shown (see Image #11, middle and right), for example Moses in his little ark (Exodus 2:3), but represented as a basket (see *Baby Moses* above), and God’s angel appearing in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2–3).

Joshua & the Battle of Jericho (1992)

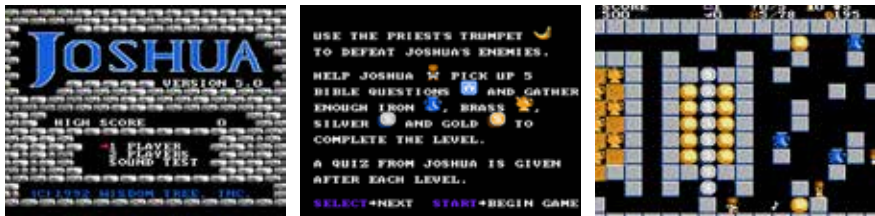


Image #12
Stills from *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1992).

Joshua & the Battle of Jericho (NES 1992; GameBoy, 1993; DOS and Sega Genesis, 1994) is also a conversion of Color Dreams' *Crystal Mines* (NES 1989) and is very much like its predecessor *Exodus: Journey to the Promised Land* (see Image #12, left).²² The player is told, paraphrasing the book of Joshua (1:2 especially): "After the death of Moses, the Lord told Joshua to cross the River Jordan and claim the land they had been promised. Fierce battles followed and the Lord's promises to the Israelites were fulfilled." Where Moses "shot" W's at his enemies, it is now Joshua doing the same with musical notes (see Image #12, middle and right), a reference to the Battle of Jericho (Joshua 6:4). The enemies are now "Hittite citizens", an "enemy king", "Amorite soldiers", and "Balaam the Sooth-sayer" (from Joshua 13:22). Again, after each stage the player gets five Bible trivia-questions for extra lives, but no devotional imagery is shown.

²² Scullion, "Joshua & the Battle of Jericho."

Spiritual Warfare (1992)



Image #13
Stills from *Spiritual Warfare*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1992).

Spiritual Warfare (NES 1992, Genesis 1994) resembles one of Nintendo's greatest hits, *The Legend of Zelda* (1986).²³ The game places (see Image #13, top left) the gamer in the shoes of a pious young Christian whose home town is infested by criminals and demons (see Image #13, middle top). The hero has to find and use the six pieces of the "Armor of God" (see Image #13, bottom right), a reference to Ephesians 6:10–18, consisting of the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Boots of the Gospel, the Helmet of Salvation, the Sword of the Spirit, and the Shield of Faith. The manual introduces the game as follows:

Experience *Spiritual Warfare* as you discover firsthand the whole armor of God in preparation to meet the enemies of God. You will also see just how the fruit of the Spirit can impact the lives of others and ultimately win an entire city to God. The shield of God will be your most important weapon in helping you to remain steadfast. But remember that the battle is not yours alone, it is the Lord's. [Quote of Ephesians 6:13–18 follows.]²⁴

²³ Scullion, "Spiritual Warfare."
²⁴ The manual is fully available on <https://www.thegameisafotarcade.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Spiritual-Warfare-Game-Manual.pdf> [accessed 21 November 2021].

The player shoots these “enemies of God” with five different “Fruits of the Holy Spirit”, allegorically represented as pears, pomegranates, apples, grapes, and bananas (see Image #13, bottom left), not to kill them (of course) but to convert them (a reference to Galatians 5). If hit, the enemies will go down on their knees, folding their hands in prayer. Sometimes a red devil will pop out of a thus converted human, ready to kill the young Christian.

If lucky, the player will receive “ointment” for bombs, and doves for coins, which are used to buy upgrades. From time to time, a guardian angel appears. If it is touched, the player is given – quite familiarly – five Bible trivia-questions to gain more doves and restore lost life (see Image #13, top right). In the accompanying manual, a by now familiar feedback form is included.

Bible Buffet (1993)



Image #14
Stills from Bible Buffet. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1993).

Bible Buffet (NES 1993) is a board game-turned-video game, played by up to four players sharing one controller (see Image #14, left).²⁵ Players spin a wheel for a number, which then carries their avatar over a game board (see Image #14, middle). Once a red dot or a question mark is reached, the game brings the player either to an Exodus or Joshua-inspired mini-game where different kinds of fruits and vegetables have to be fought against for no apparent reason (see Image #14, right), or to a ‘Pop Quiz’.

25 Scullion, “Bible Buffet.”

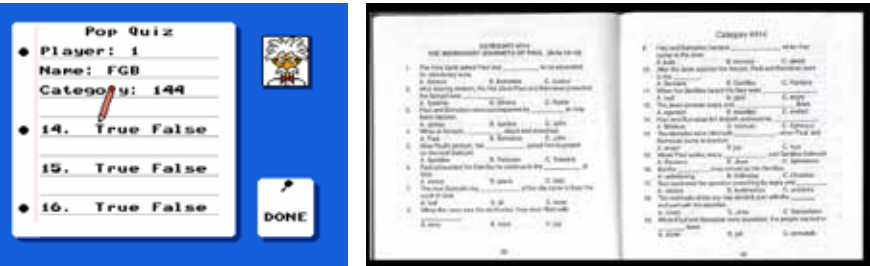


Image #15
More stills from Bible Buffet. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1993).

The Bible trivia, like other Wisdom Tree games, is a story of its own (see Image #15, left). Instead of giving both questions and possible answers to choose from, Bible Buffet lets the player refer to a 92-page, 950-question booklet, sold together with the game cassette.²⁶ Understandably, this inconvenienced quite some players, since the game was virtually impossible to play without the easily lost booklet. And just like in King of Kings, this game’s booklet also provides a feedback form, rating the players’ experiences, including education and biblical accuracy.²⁷ It also mentions versions for the GameBoy, SNES, and Sega Genesis, but those were never released. Again, just like Sunday Funday (which will be dealt with further on), this game is only “biblical” or even “Christian” in the most superficial way possible.

Super Noah’s Ark 3D (1994)

Super Noah’s Ark 3D (SNES and DOS 1994), alternatively spelled Super 3D Noah’s Ark due to the design of the game’s cartridge, is a clear conversion of Wolfenstein 3D (id Software, among others released on DOS and SNES, 1992).²⁸ The story of one of the best-known Wisdom Tree games – the only unlicensed game for the SNES ever – starts with the game company’s founder Dan Lawton and his appreciation of the 1987 supernatural horror film Hellraiser (Clive Barker).²⁹

26 The booklet is fully available on [https://archive.org/details/RetroGameEphemera/Bible Buffet \(Quiz Book - 1993\)](https://archive.org/details/RetroGameEphemera/Bible%20Buffet%20(Quiz%20Book%20-1993)) [accessed 21 November 2021].
27 The manual is fully available on <https://www.thegameisafootarcade.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Bible-Buffer-Game-Manual.pdf> [accessed 21 November 2021].
28 Scullion, “Super 3D Noah’s Ark.”
29 Nutt, “Hellraider” [24 November 2021]; Durham, Bible Adventures, 116–122.

Lawton saw “kabbalistic implications” in the film, and Color Dreams acquired both the license for a NES *Hellraiser* game for € 50,000, and the *Wolfenstein* source code for an unspecified amount of money. According to a now debunked internet myth, id Software handed Wisdom Tree their source code for free, because of their supposed anger towards Nintendo, which had forced id Software to censor the SNES version of their game heavily in order to get the Japanese seal of approval.

The *Hellraiser* NES game was never released because Color Dreams failed to engineer their “super cart”, which would have enabled the older console to run far superior games, because id Software published their next mega hit *Doom* (id Software, among others released on DOS and SNES, 1993), and because the whole *Hellraiser* idea would have conflicted with the company’s new family-friendly and Christian image. What Wisdom Tree produced instead was not an original *Hellraiser* NES game, but a Christian version of *Wolfenstein 3D* for SNES. As Durham ironically summarizes, the differences are merely cosmetic (to put it mildly):

Instead of a WWII spy, you control Noah. Instead of a gun, you’ve got a slingshot. Instead of bullets, you shoot fruit. (Not the Fruits of the Spirit this time, but regular produce.) Instead of a Nazi castle, you’re on the Ark. Instead of Nazis, you shoot goats, ostriches, sheep, and oxen. Instead of swastikas, the walls are covered with paintings of animals. Instead of Hitler, you face Burt the Bear. The maps, though? Identical to *Wolfenstein*. The ammo/health placement? Identical. The enemy AI? Identical.³⁰



Image #16
Stills from *Super Noah’s Ark 3D*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1994).

³⁰ Durham, 120.

This time, Noah (see Image #16, left) does not have to bring the animals inside the ark, but has to maintain order on board. Apparently, all the animals have lost their marbles and run around the maze the ark has been made into, trying to kick Noah in his face as soon as they see him. To sooth the animals, Noah shoots fruit at the animals, which immediately, if inexplicably, puts them into a deep sleep (see Image #16, right). At the beginning of the game, the player’s task is explained (see Image #16, middle):

You’ll be out of the ark in six days, Noah. Unfortunately, the animals are a tad bit restless and want to get out now. Good thing you brought all that food with you. You’ll need it to put the busy ones to sleep. At the end of the first day, be prepared to deal with Carl the Camel. He’s been real cranky lately and is a bit out of control. Good luck and be careful...

Carl the cranky Camel is then followed by irritable Ginny the Giraffe, Melvin the tricky Monkey, Kerry the Kangaroo, Ernie the Elephant, and finally Burt the Bear, all serving as level bosses. When all have been put to sleep – the association with euthanasia is irresistible – the end-screen just shows all the bosses in chronological order without any further explanation of a narrative conclusion. The word “God” is not even used once in this game, quite a feat for a “Bible game”.

King James Bible (1994)



Image #17
Stills from *King James Bible*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1994).

The *King James Bible* (GB 1994) provides – as the title suggests – a complete and researchable version of the King James Bible in pocket format (see Image #17). Nothing more, nothing less. Technically speaking it is not even a game, since there are no ludic elements to be found in it. Nevertheless, it is incorporated within this list of Wisdom Tree games, since it fits so nicely into the overall policy of the company.

Sunday Funday (1995)



Image #18
Stills from *Sunday Funday* (left) and *Menace Beach* (middle and right). Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1995).

Sunday Funday (NES 1995) is comprised of *Sunday Funday*, *Fishfall*, and *4Him* (see image left). The titular game is a conversion of Color Dreams’ earlier non-religious game *Menace Beach* (NES 1990) and has the “honour” of being the last NES game ever released. *Menace Beach* (see image right) is primarily remembered for the odd cut scenes between levels in which the hero’s girlfriend, Bunny, whom he is supposed to free, urges her lover to be quick, lest her clothes “rot away” (see image right).³¹ In every successive cut scene, Bunny’s anger grows, but the amount of clothes she has on diminishes up until she is dressed in nothing but a tiny black bikini.

31 Scullion, “Menace Beach.”

Sunday Funday



Image #19
More stills from *Sunday Funday*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1995).

Sunday Funday looks almost exactly like *Menace Beach*, including the title screen (see Image #19, left), although it does contain some very minor alterations and is indeed a Bible game, but only very superficially.³² It illustrates perfectly Wisdom Tree’s policy, as voiced by the company’s co-owner Brenda Huff: “Basically, what we were doing was taking the garbage out and putting the Bible content in. That’s the whole reason for the company to begin with.”³³ When the game starts (see Image #19, middle), the player’s Sunday school teacher urges it to come quickly: “You’d better hop on your skateboard and get here right away! I don’t want to start without you.” The rest of the game revolves around a little kid skateboarding through town, while everything and everyone wants to keep him away from God. He can defend himself by skating over them or throwing newspapers at them, turning them into a dove flying upwards (see Image #19, right).

32 Scullion, “Sunday Funday.”
33 Quoted in: Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 399.

Fishfall



Image #20

Stills from *Fishfall*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1995).

Fishfall (see Image #20, left) is a very simple game involving a floating hand catching fish and throwing them back into a basket (see Image #20, right). The biblical frame is taken from (the King James version of) Matthew 4:19: “And he saith unto them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fishers of men’” (see Image #20, middle). In fact, this is the only “biblical” aspect of the game.

4HIM



Image #21

Still from *4Him*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1995).

The last “game” in the *Sunday Funday* collection is *4Him*, effectively a sing-along version of several hits by a contemporary Christian music group by the same name, active from 1990 to 2006. The first song, for example, is “Ride of Life” from 1994 (see Image #21).

NIV Bible & the 20 Lost Levels of Joshua (1996)

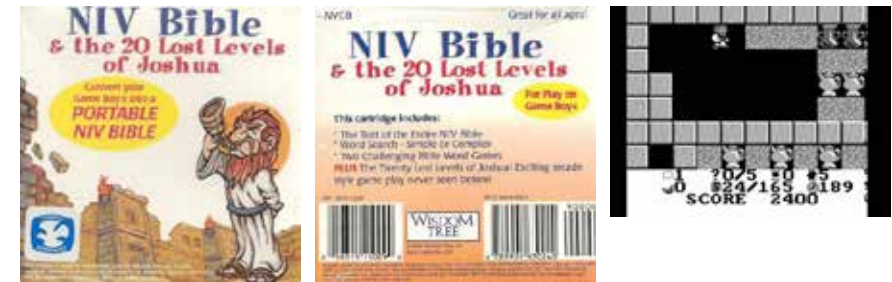


Image #22

Stills from *NIV Bible & the 20 Lost Levels of Joshua*. Copyright: Wisdom Tree (1996).

Four years after *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* was published, a “sequel” was published under the name *NIV Bible & the 20 Lost Levels of Joshua* (GameBoy, 1996) (see Image #22, left and middle). It features twenty “extra” levels made in the spitting image of the original NES game (see Image #22, right), may it be in the black and white graphics native to the Gameboy. Also included was the complete text of the Bible, not in the King James translation as in 1994, but the more contemporary New International Version.

Theological analysis

From a theological point of view of the Wisdom Tree Library of Christian and Bible games, a couple of features can be identified.

Digital Bibliodrama

In the first place, many of the games discussed above seem to fall into the category of Bibliodrama. This especially goes for the three games found in *Bible Adventures*, and the three in *The King of Kings*, but also for *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land*, *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* (including its “sequel”), and *Super Noah’s Ark 3D*. Bibliodrama is “a role-playing, exegetical pedagogy in which the roles are taken from the biblical text”. The participants are thought to “gain a

deeper understanding of the original story or pericope through a more comprehensive examination of experiential and cognitive learning modalities.”³⁴ Usually, such an exercise would take place in a classroom or church, where participants would voluntarily choose a character from a given biblical story to identify with and act out in the ensuing performance.

From a communication perspective, Bibliodrama is quite complex. Firstly, the drama has an intertextual relationship with its source material, the biblical story that has been chosen to be enacted. Next, the participants of the Bibliodrama will interact with their source material in order to find their own unique perspective on the story and act accordingly in harmony with the other actors. Communicatively speaking (see Scheme #1), real readers of the Bibliodrama in question are asked by the text-immanent author (of the re-enacted text, probably personified in the leader of the exercise) to identify so greatly with the text-immanent author (of said drama) that they can take upon themselves the roles of characters within the story that is acted out.³⁵

Of course, within the context of real people acting out a biblical story, these real readers (the actors) can choose to either identify with the text-immanent reader, i.e. to behave as is appropriate in these circumstances, or not to identify, i.e. to sabotage the act by disrupting the process deliberately. Because they are real readers and not text-immanent readers, the actors can take considerable freedom in regard to the way they will act out their chosen role, but only as far as the text-immanent author of the Bibliodrama allows them to.

Now, in video games this is somewhat different. In video games, the text-immanent reader (player) of the game is entangled with the avatar-character that the reader/player is controlling and by which it interacts with the game world. In *Bible Adventures*, for example, the text-immanent reader is entangled with the game’s avatars, Noah, Miriam, and David respectively. The choice of which character the immanent player has to “act out” is, however, strictly limited by the game’s text-immanent author on the one hand and the limitations of the older consoles from the 1990s on the other. They are not modern-day role-play-

³⁴ Tirrell, “Bibliodrama.” Cf. Pitzele, *Scripture Windows*; Agten, “Bibliodrama.” See also: Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art*.

³⁵ See also: Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art*.

ing games like *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) in which the text-immanent player can create a highly customised appearance and have far more options regarding how to proceed through the game.

This all leads to a very confined and highly limited re-enactment of the biblical stories the games present its players with, rendering it all rather dull and repetitive.

Catechesis using trivia

Several games, especially *The King of Kings*, *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land*, *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho*, *Spiritual Warfare*, and *Bible Buffet*, feature – in one form or another – trivia-questions about the Bible in general or about the biblical episode the game focusses on. Besides the fact that these trivia-sections form a very abrupt and disruptive breach in the overall flow of the game itself (see also the next section) and that the “injection” of biblical questions into otherwise fairly unrelated games only seems justified by marketing purposes, the question-and-answer kind of catechetical method appears rather old-fashioned *vis-à-vis* the ecclesiastical reality of the 1990s and the freshness of the medium itself.

The Bible trivia look even more odd from a communication perspective. The ludic division between the regular game flow and the interruptive biblical questionnaires risks also rupturing the integrity of the single text-immanent player itself. It almost seems that the text-immanent player of the game is not, or not necessarily, the same as the one found in the trivia sections of the game. In layman’s terms, the two games within the single game appear to have a different player in mind: the trivia section presupposes a Bible-loving, devout Christian who enjoys reading, learning, and quizzing the Bible, while the actual game presents itself as appealing to a much broader, general public interested in playing these kinds of games.

Moreover, the majority of the Wisdom Tree games take such liberty with their biblical source material, that the catechetical goal, in a strict sense, cannot be

attained or is actually even thwarted. Miriam did not fight off hordes of Egyptian enemies in Exodus, the Holy Family was not hindered by rabbis in Luke or Matthew, and Noah did not shoot fruit at obnoxious bears and giraffes in order to maintain order aboard the ark. Of course, playfully and creatively adopting or appropriating source material, whether the Bible or not, is a very common feature in literature and other forms of art and media, but because of the devout and “strict” communication of the biblical trivia section, the liberty the games take with the biblical sources is – paradoxically – much more contrasting.

Wisdom Tree reading the Bible

The Wisdom Tree Game Library uses the Bible in mainly two ways: a game contains literal Bible quotes and/or paraphrases a Bible story. The literal Bible quotes often appear at the end of the game, as in *David and Goliath* and *Fishfall*. The winning end-result of the game and the Bible quote therefore coincide. The player thus gets the impression that winning or completing a game is confirmed by the Bible.

Sometimes these Bible quotes are extended using related texts. An example of this is found in *King of Kings*. A kind of sermon is shown to the player in which various biblical texts have been incorporated. The selection is associative. The biblical title “King of kings” for Jesus is only found in 1 Timothy 6:15 and in Revelation 17:14; 19:16. But these verses are neither mentioned nor alluded to while, from a biblical perspective, citing the biblical source of a title of honour for Jesus may be considered relevant.

The Wise Men, on the other hand, ends with a traditional Christmas image: Jesus in a manger with Mary and Joseph on either side in a room that looks like a stable. But there is no stable (or manger for that matter) in the Gospel of Matthew, which is the only Gospel that mentions the Magi. The Magi rather enter a house (2:11). The closing image of the game is based on the Gospel of Luke (which does not mention the Magi, but in which a manger, but not a stable, does occur in 2:7). Here it might have been better to opt for the Bible itself instead of trite Christmas piety.

It is noticeable that the use of the Bible in these video games is very much focused on Jesus, and not so much on Christ or on God. It is as if Jesus is the final goal in the biblical texts and that the believer, based on his/her relationship with Jesus, does not enter into the relationship that Jesus has with God, his Father. Moreover, this focus is individualistic. It is about the player’s *personal* relationship with Jesus. The idea of a *community* of the faithful is irrelevant. Perhaps that also explains the fact that the focus is not on Christ, because Christ is not only an honorary title for Jesus, but also for the community. It also explains the absence of any mention of baptism, although baptism is explicitly mentioned in New Testament texts. Baptism is not just an individual’s confession of faith, but a sacramental way of becoming a member of the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, for example, the above-mentioned quote from the manual of *King of Kings* only formulates an individualistic confession of faith in Jesus, in which baptism is apparently replaced by a kind of contract-theology.³⁶

Actually, this focus on Jesus is rather strangely formulated in the manual of *King of Kings*. It states that you have to address Jesus to thank him for your salvation. However, the text of the manual does not conclude with words like ‘Thank You for my salvation, You brought in Your name’, but with the formula ‘Thank You for my salvation, in Jesus’ name. Amen’, in which Jesus is no longer the addressee and therefore the ‘You’ must refer to someone else – maybe God, who is almost absent in the theology of the Wisdom Tree games.

Sometimes the Wisdom Tree Game Library paraphrases biblical texts instead of giving a literal quotation. However, things can often go wrong when paraphrasing. We see this clearly in *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho*. The whole book of Joshua is summarized in a few lines. In these lines, it is rightly stated that the Lord commands Joshua to *enter* the promised land, but it is not correct in saying that he must *claim* the land. The land is, namely, a gift from the Lord, and cannot be claimed by people.³⁷

This emphasis on the land is possibly the result of what is called “Israel-theology”. The land is indeed a biblical theme, which has been snowed under in

³⁶ See on baptism and the incorrect idea of ‘club-membership’ also Van Wieringen, *Seven Sacraments*, 27–28.

³⁷ See on biblical appropriation also Van Wieringen, “Psalm 65.”

Christian theology, especially where substitution theologies have emerged. Israel-theology distances itself from any form of substitution theology and gives the land, more specifically the land of the Jews, a theological, but also a political place. In the German language area, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt in particular committed himself to a land-theology, while in America Walter Brueggemann did so.³⁸

The paraphrasing of the book of Joshua in *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* continues by describing that, after entering the promised land, fierce battles take place. But that is precisely *not* the case in the biblical text. There are, however, forms of liturgy, especially processions, rather than battles. Jericho is ‘conquered’ by a great liturgical event, as a result of which the walls collapse of their own accord; the book of Joshua does not speak of acts of war.

Despite the possible connection with “Israel-theology”, antisemitism also seems to be present in the Wisdom Tree Game Library. For example, in *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land* the player must help Moses survive the murmuring Israelites. The people do indeed murmur against Moses, but that is a problem that takes place *within* God’s people, not between Israelites and Moses as if Moses were not an Israelite. In *Flight to Egypt*, the holy family on the flight to Egypt is thwarted by a rabbi figure. But the Gospel of Matthew describes nothing of what happens on the flight to Egypt, let alone of rabbis getting in the way of the three refugees.

The title of *Jesus and the Temple* also demands attention. The title is notable for its use of the word “and”, while the game also cites Luke 2:46, which actually speaks of Jesus as being “in” the temple. If Jesus cannot really be found anywhere else but *in* the temple, then the temple is important, perhaps of lasting importance. However, in the case of ‘Jesus *and* the temple’, used as the title of the video game, Jesus could be valued as being more than the temple. This tension is also often the subject of discussion in Israel-theology.

The Wisdom Tree Game Library uses good and widely used Bible translations. Quotations are either from the *King James Version*, the standard English trans-

lation of the early 17th century, or from the *New International Version*, the first edition of which was published in 1973.

Narratological dissonances

Two narratological phenomena normally play a role in the transition from text to video game: the filling in of blanks and gaps and the handling of narration-time and narrated time.³⁹ Blanks and gaps occur in all stories. Blanks are the textual hiatuses that do not need to be filled in by the text-immanent reader to understand the story. Gaps are hiatuses that the text-immanent reader must fill in. The text-immanent author manipulates the text-immanent reader in doing this.

An example of a blank is, in the story of Joshua and Jericho, the colour of Joshua’s eyes. It does not matter to the story. But because the video game works with images, a colour has to be chosen for his eyes. We see that Wisdom Tree Game Library standardly chooses the colour blue. One can only speculate as to why. In the art of the Western world, Jesus resembles Erik the Viking more than a native of the Near East. But the choice for blue can also stem from the idea of just not being historicising. All the characters in the games of Wisdom Tree look more like cartoon characters than historical people. However, the reason why a certain colour is chosen for the eyes is to be found at the level of the real author and therefore falls outside the scope of this contribution.

Things get very interesting for the daughter of Pharaoh, with Miriam, Moses’ sister, in the background in *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land* (see Image #11, middle). She is not only represented as a woman with (presumably) blue eyes, but also dressed in a blue robe and a white veil. This makes her very similar to the traditional representation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Western art, whose clothing is blue. Is this an implicit Christological (or in the framework of the Wisdom Tree rather Jesological) interpretation of the story of Moses?

Gaps are much more complicated to deal with than blanks. The biblical story of David and Goliath concludes with the narrated act of David bringing Goliath’s

³⁸ See especially Marquardt, *Die Bedeutung der biblischen Landverheißungen*; Brueggemann, *The Land*.

³⁹ See also Van Wieringen, “Bible Text as Narration and Bible Illustration as Narration.”

severed head to Jerusalem. But Jerusalem still has to be conquered by David, which only happens when David becomes king instead of Saul. In the biblical story of David and Goliath, Jerusalem is still a Jebusite city, not the capital of the Israelite Kingdom. In *David and Goliath* this narratological problem is avoided by not including this scene in the game.

This is different for the game *Jesus and the Temple*. Jesus is apparently missing, and Mary and Joseph go looking for him. But how do Mary and Joseph arrive at the idea that Jesus is missing, so that they go looking for him? In Luke 2:22–38, Mary and Joseph bring the 40-day-old baby Jesus to the temple, after which they return to their place Nazareth (2:39), while Jesus grows up in the temple (2:40).⁴⁰ They go there every year on Passover (2:41), but when Jesus is 12 years old, he turns out to have been left behind in Jerusalem (where he actually had been all the time), without his parents knowing (2:42). Why would Jesus' parents suddenly experience a problem for the twelfth time? The game fills in this gap by having Mary give an emotional cry: "Oh No! Where is young Jesus?" Whereupon the calm Joseph comes to the rescue with the statement "I don't know", adding the wise idea: "We must find him" (where 'him' is not capitalized).

Narration-time and narrated time are about textual tempo: the relationship between the time an event lasts (which is sometimes called 'pace' or 'pacing') and the time it takes to read the text describing the event. The more important an event is for the text-immanent author, the more time is spent on it in a story, regardless of the duration of the event itself.

The story of Noah's ark states in one sentence that of all the clean and unclean animals, one male and one female entered the ark. The time it takes to read this sentence is very short, but of course the event itself is considerably longer in duration. In the game *Noah's Ark*, the ludological aspect revolves around the animals that have to enter the ark, which makes the narration-time suddenly much longer than in the biblical narrative.

The difference between narration-time and narrated time becomes even great-

⁴⁰ Sinninghe Damsté, *Questions in Luke 1:5–2:52*, 288.

er in *David and Goliath*. David protecting his own flock of sheep does not occur in the biblical story as a narrative act at all. David does talk about it with Saul, but it does not happen in the narrative; it is not an event in the story, but in the game it is an essential ludological part.

Of course, the phenomenon of changes in the relationship between narration-time and narrated time are characteristic of the transition from Bible text to Bible game. After all, there must be something to play. The catechetical pitfall, however, is that the gamer (i.e. the text-immanent reader of the game) might think that the core of the biblical story lies with the events that are played, while in the text of the biblical story these are relatively short or even absent.

Christian dissonances

Most of the Wisdom Tree games fail to negotiate the danger of ludic-narrative dissonance, which occurs when the game's gameplay (the ludic dimension) forces or stimulates the player to behave in a way that is in conflict with the game's story (the narrative dimension). This is especially visible in the conversions of earlier Color Dreams games, like *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land* and *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* from *Crystal Mines*, *Sunday Funday* from *Menace Beach*, and *Super Noah's Ark 3D* from *Wolfenstein 3D*, but also games like *Spiritual Warfare* and *Bible Buffet* suffer from this kind of dissonance.

In both cases, a "secular" game has only been aesthetically "pimped" in order to produce what ought to pass as a Christian or Bible game. This is perhaps best visible in the case of *Menace Beach/Sunday Funday*, where the actual gameplay makes no sense in respect to the game's story. The nameless boy on the skateboard is urged by his Sunday school teacher to "get here right away". Once on his skateboard, all the citizens of his little town seem to conspire to stop him from reaching Sunday school in time, for no apparent reason whatsoever. The boy can stop his "enemies", for lack of a better word, by skating into them, turning them in doves-cum-ghosts who fly off into the heavens. If this represents killing them, wouldn't that be in violation of everything Sunday school should teach him?

The game *Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land* also contains a Christian dissonance. Apart from the Word of God, the Calf (= the Golden Calf) can also be used as a weapon against the enemies. Because the Golden Calf is an idol, the game in fact suggests that both God's Word as well as an idol can be used against the enemies of freedom, while the Wisdom Tree Library itself aims to teach the unique importance of the Word of God.

The same dissonance is illustratively apparent in *Spiritual Warfare*. All kinds of Paul-inspired instruments of war pass across the screen: the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Boots of the Gospel, and so forth. And armed with these, the – again – nameless hero can fight against his enemies, criminals, and demons alike. Just like in the case of *Sunday Funday*, the hero of *Spiritual Warfare* can kill his enemies only to see them transform into a dove, apparently representing their saved souls going to heaven.

The weapons of “warfare” mentioned in Paul's letters are clearly spiritual in nature, but not in the sense that they serve as actual instruments of war against non-believers and demons. Paul's warfare is spiritual because he refers to an unseen battle taking place on a spiritual plane. *Spiritual Warfare* is an example of what happens when metaphorical language is taken literally. The Wisdom Tree games all “suffer” from a rather fundamentalist view of the Bible, in the sense that the games do not seem to differentiate between the textual world of the Bible and the real world outside that text, including the games themselves.

Final remark

The Wisdom Tree Library is very instructive and is illustrative for a genre often neglected by theologians and game historians alike, namely that of Christian and Bible games. The Wisdom Tree Game Library shows both the merits and the deficiencies of the genre: on the one hand, games like *Bible Adventures* and *Spiritual Warfare* form a rare experiment in combining Christian faith with the relatively new genre of the video game, while on the other hand the games in question do not excel both in terms of biblical theology and ludic qualities. In order to create a truly good “Christian game” – regarding both biblical-theological and ludic aspects – the idea of creating a good game in the first place is

probably a better idea than forcing a Christian message onto an already mediocre product to begin with, especially if one wishes to avoid the aforementioned ludic-narrative dissonance.⁴¹

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⁴¹ We are greatly indebted to Dr Maurits J. Sinninghe Damsté (Breña Baja, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain) for his correction of the English of this contribution and for his substantive suggestions.

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JERUSALEM, CITY ON A SILENT HILL

HAUNTED SPACES OF THE LATTER PROPHETS
AND THE VIDEO GAME AND FILM FRANCHISE

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In Christian traditions, Jerusalem has come to be thought of as the “city on a hill,” the exemplar that the rest of the world looks up to for its close relationship with God. The phrase first makes its appearance in Matthew 5:14, in which Jesus proclaims to his followers that “a city built on a hill cannot be hid”.¹ And it was cemented in the American imagination through the well-known speech of John Winthrop, delivered when his group of Puritans first established the Massachusetts Bay colony. Winthrop presented this image with a little more anxiety than it’s usually received; he cautioned that they were proclaiming themselves to be a righteous people of God, and that they were establishing this colony as a people living in harmony with God’s will. If they fell short, the world would know.²

¹ Here and elsewhere, biblical translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

² Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 79–81, makes the point that this phrase was common among Puritan preachers at the time as an uplifting reminder to the congregants of God’s blessings. Winthrop’s advancement was to turn the phrase into an ominous threat. Winship analyzes Winthrop’s warning: “if the colony failed, as it easily could, that failure would be a huge blow to puritanism, one felt in Europe,” 80.

In a number of places throughout the Hebrew Bible, the hill or mountain of Jerusalem is described, usually with specific reference to the Temple Mount.³ In Isaiah, this is the mountain that will be God's home once the temple is restored, and to which the peoples of all nations will come to pay homage. We see this in Isaiah 2:2: "In days to come the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it." A similar image is repeated at the end of the book of Isaiah, when YHWH describes Jerusalem as "[God's] holy mountain," to which all the nations will come to bring tribute (Isaiah 66:20).⁴ In this vision of the Lord's day, Jerusalem is the city on the hill that will serve as God's throne, as the center of God's reign.

This optimistic view of Jerusalem as the eschatological city on the hill is filtered through the post-exilic lens of the later Isaian texts, texts which are fantastically optimistic about the relationship between Israel and God, and about the future for the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. It's a vision of Jerusalem that begins to take shape after the city's invasion by the Babylonian armies in the late 6th century BCE, as the people are mourning their loss in exile. As James Carroll writes, "Only...in exile did the city from which they had been roughly taken clearly emerge in the Jewish imagination as a place of transcendent meaning."⁵ After the physical reality of Jerusalem had been taken from them, the prophetic texts serve the function of creating Jerusalem which served as a symbol of hope and connection with the divine.

But this isn't the only vision of Jerusalem offered by the prophetic corpus. We also see a ruined city, a city abandoned by both God and people. In these texts, the city on a hill has become silent. It is these texts which make the most interesting comparison with the multimedia franchise Silent Hill. First appearing as a game for the original PlayStation in 1999; it spawned a number of sequels

3 Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains, and the temple is on a hill that looms above the city itself. This is described in Psalm 125:2: "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people."

4 Blenkinsopp, "Continuity-Discontinuity in Isaiah 40–66," argues that this emphasis on the location of Jerusalem is one of the things that binds many of the texts of Isaiah 40–66 together, although he rejects the earlier hypothesis that these textual locations are indications of place of authorship as being overly naïve. But still, Blenkinsopp sees in this focus on Jerusalem a vision of "a future restoration dependent on the return of the deported from other lands," 88, a restoration which is focused on the people's return to the city of Jerusalem.

5 Carroll, *Jerusalem*, 65.

across multiple consoles, two film adaptations (Silent Hill in 2006 and Silent Hill: Revelation in 2012), and a number of novelizations. While the franchise contains an ever-shifting cast of characters (with only a few connected to one another over the course of the various installments), one constant is the city itself. The precise nature of the city is kept hidden, but all of its iterations seem to have some common threads: Silent Hill is a haunted city that exists somewhere in between times and spaces, was born out of a traumatic past, and gathers people towards itself who are unable to reconcile themselves with their past. In these features, the city of Silent Hill is eerily similar to the ruined Jerusalem of the prophetic corpus – a city destroyed by sin, which stands as a reminder of the broken covenant between God and the people.

Silent Hill

In all of its manifestations, the city of Silent Hill is a haunted, liminal space, deeply connected with unresolved guilt and gothic conceptions of sin that refuses to stay in the past. Alexander Kriss refers to it as "a place driven by laws more emotional than Newtonian,"⁶ a phrase which applies equally well to all of the city's manifestations. Its precise nature seems to shift from installment to installment – in SH1⁷ and SH2006, Silent Hill seems to be an actual town, located in Maine (or West Virginia in the films), which was largely abandoned as the result of a mining accident. In SH2, it seems to be a lakeside resort town, which is also a ghost town, but it's even less clear how the town's geography relates to any kind of physical reality, or whether the entire town is in some kind of liminal dimension. In all of its manifestations, various dimensions lay on top of the base layer of the city, (often known among players as the "fog world" and the "other world"), and it's not quite clear how much of the gameplay or film narrative occurs within the same world as we all inhabit on an everyday basis. In all of its manifestations, Silent Hill is a town of fog, shadows, and

6 Kriss, *Universal Play*, 17.

7 This contribution will follow the nomenclature used by scholars including Ewan Kirkland and Amy Beddows, which uses SH1, SH2, SH3, and SH4 for the first four video games, and SH2006 to refer to the first Silent Hill film. This contribution will primarily consider SH1, SH2, and SH2006.

abandoned buildings, and a deeply wounded sense of collective trauma.⁸

The town's physical geography is linked to the recurring theme of its function as a spiritual magnet, seeming to attract people who are connected to the town in some way, and perhaps also – especially in SH2 – ridden with guilt. In some of the richest episodes of the franchise, even the monsters that haunt the cityscape are tied to the characters' sense of guilt, such that the city seems to be responding in real time to the psychic wounds of those who enter it. Those wounds also seem to be what draws people to the town. It also seems to contain elements of being an interstitial zone between life and death, a waystation for people who in some way refuse to accept the reality of their death.⁹

We see this in SH1, where Harry and his adopted daughter Cheryl seem drawn to Silent Hill as a vacation destination. After a car crash on the outskirts of town, Harry wakes to find his daughter missing, and himself trapped in a nightmarish version of the city he thought he knew.¹⁰

Through the course of the game, players learn that Cheryl is connected (through a shared soul) with a young woman, Alessa, who was horribly abused by the inhabitants of Silent Hill. Alessa has called Cheryl back in order to use her body as a means through which to enact her vengeance on the townspeople.¹¹ The plot of SH2006 is quite similar, though in the film the intentionality of Cheryl is emphasized – rather than convincing her father to take her on vacations to the town of Silent Hill, Cheryl runs away to this abandoned ghost town, for reasons she can't explain. And there's nothing of a vacation town in the filmic Silent Hill, just a long-abandoned mining town, home only to a cult that has tried to barricade itself in the town's sanctuary for safety, and a horde of monsters that seem to have emerged directly from the unconscious. This is

⁸ As might be inferred from this brief introduction, the *Silent Hill* games are heavy on story-telling and imagery. This is not to say that interactivity is not an important element in how they convey their message. For an article that explores how the games ludological elements interact with these more narrative elements, see: Kirkland, "Restless Dreams in *Silent Hill*." In another article, Kirkland explores how the *Silent Hill* games make heavy use of narrative and the conventions of art-cinema, even in their marketing campaigns: Kirkland, "Discursively Constructing the Art of *Silent Hill*."

⁹ Kirkland, "Restless Dreams," 171, has noted a number of references in SH1 to the 1990 film *Jacob's Ladder*, another narrative about this kind of an interstitial zone.

¹⁰ The *Silent Hill* games usually feature incredibly convoluted plots; rather than attempting to summarize everything, this contribution will focus on the plot elements that connect with the city of Silent Hill's identity.

¹¹ More details about the plot of SH1, the ways in which it is adapted and altered as SH2006, and how all of this connects with the role of women in religion, are discussed in Beddows, "Ferocious Marys and Dark Alessas."

most clearly shown through the figure of Pyramid Head in SH2006 (referred to in the film's credits as "The Red Pyramid"), who is played by the actor who also plays the role of the janitor who sexually abused Alessa (Robert Campanella). The figure was originally developed for the character of James in SH2, and also bears a connection with his experience of trauma.

In SH2, players adopt the avatar of James, a young man grieving the loss of his wife to cancer. But when the game starts, he has received a handwritten note from his deceased wife, begging him to meet her at their "special place" in Silent Hill. This quest sends him to a variety of locations in Silent Hill, all of them derelict and monster-infested. When he finally arrives at the Lakeview Hotel, where James and his wife shared a vacation together, James finds a videotape that reveals an event James had buried in his subconscious: his wife was terminally ill, but rather than dying of this disease as James remembers, he sees himself smothering her with a pillow. In the game's final battle, James must defeat a rage-filled, demonic version of his wife – who might be a truly supernatural being, or only a creation of James' guilt-ridden mind.

Throughout the story, players encounter a handful of other characters, all of whom have been drawn to Silent Hill because of some guilt they're trying to suppress. Kriss describes these characters as "drift[ing] through town as though entranced, enduring its horrors with a vague hope that whatever they find will repair their broken lives."¹² Players encounter Eddie, who hints that he ran to Silent Hill after incidents involving killing a dog and seriously injuring a bully. And James repeatedly encounters a young woman named Angela who claims to be looking for her mother (or "mama", as she occasionally slips and calls her). Through the course of the game, players learn that Angela is also running away from herself: she was a victim of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of both her father and brother, and killed both of them to escape. This trauma shows up most directly in the final boss fight of the labyrinth level: a monster known as "Abstract Daddy," who seems to be a figure (or two figures?) coiled around a bedframe. Pyramid Head, a manifestation of Alessa's trauma in SH2006, is in SH2 a punishing figure, stalking James for his repressed murder of his wife. Throughout the game, James encounters a mysterious wom-

¹² Kriss, *Universal Play*, 18.

an named Maria who seems to be a doppelgänger of James' wife; each of her manifestations ends with her being brutally murdered at the hands of Pyramid Head. James' repressed unconscious is trying to force its way through to the surface through these repeated references to the death of James' wife.

There are six possible endings for SH2; in an interview with IGN, the development staff seemed to indicate that they view all, or perhaps any (excluding the two "joke" endings), of them as canonical.¹³ The endings offer different interpretations of the events the players have just played through, but all of them seem to view Silent Hill and its monstrous denizens as primarily being a creation of James' psyche. A concluding encounter with Angela seems even to indicate that each character experiences the town differently. James and Angela meet on a staircase engulfed in flames. James says to her, "It's hot as hell in here." Angela seems surprised by this remark, and asks James, "You see it, too? For me, it's always like this." It seems like the Silent Hill Angela inhabits is not the same Silent Hill that James inhabits. But somehow, this city coheres into a shared traumatic response, with Silent Hill joining the traumas of James, Eddie, and Angela (as well as Maria, who may be a version of James' deceased wife or merely a psychical creation of his) enough to allow each character to interact with one another and share the same space. As James comes to realize his responsibility for Mary's death, the monsters of the town disappear; it's unclear how the other characters would experience James' bittersweet catharsis.

In all of these instalments, Silent Hill was once a town of hope; a thriving mining community, or a lakeside tourist destination. But it has been misshapen by anger and trauma, transformed into a haunted shell of its former days. Its only denizens are those created or trapped by the rage and guilt that gave birth to the town, or those who are drawn to it because of their own. It is a haunted town, that has become home for haunted people and the monsters they create.

¹³ IGN Staff, "E3 2001 Interview: Silent Hill Staff" [accessed 11 January 2024].

Haunted Jerusalem

The Hebrew Bible contains many images of Jerusalem as a city of joy, strength, or comfort, particularly in the latter prophets and the psalms. Psalm 122 has the people proclaim, "Jerusalem – built as a city that is bound firmly together," and Psalm 128:5 wishes upon the hearer the blessing to "see the prosperity of Jerusalem."¹⁴ Hendrik Viviers has referred to these poems as "mountain top experiences," writing that it is the place where "Israelite/Jewish supplicants/pilgrims experienced not only a physical 'ascending' to the safe, confidence-inspiring and life-giving Mt Zion/Jerusalem, but a meeting of their deity YHWH who chose to reside there."¹⁵ The physical space of Mt. Zion and Jerusalem have been transformed into a spiritually resonant space of transcendence.

Jerusalem is often personified as daughter or mother, at various times protecting the people, standing up for herself, or in need of protection from Israel's enemies.¹⁶ In Lamentations and throughout the latter prophets, Jerusalem is portrayed as a brutalized woman in the wake of the Babylonian invasion, frequently with overtones of sexual assault. She is often portrayed as YHWH's bride, and frequently this assault is presented as being at the hands of the deity himself.¹⁷ Amy Kalmanofsky has referred to Jerusalem as the Bible's "Final Girl," using the framework of Carol Clover.¹⁸ She is a richly imagined character, playing multiple roles in a wide range of texts.

But at other times, Jerusalem is too broken to be personified, so abandoned as to be devoid of life.¹⁹ It has been transformed into a haunted city, avoided

¹⁴ Jerusalem is particularly prevalent in the group of Psalms known as the "songs of ascent," all of which seem to be communal songs of praise offered as the people are pilgrimaging to the temple in Jerusalem. A recent overview of these psalms, focusing on their intention to build community, is Bodenhamer, "Dwelling Together;" Foster, *We Have Heard, O Lord*, 135–168, looks at how these psalms serve as part of the final book of the psalter's final movement towards ecstatic praise of God, with God's dwelling in Jerusalem as a key theological element.

¹⁵ Viviers, "Mountain Top Experiences."

¹⁶ Among abundant literature, particularly relevant texts are: Maier, *Daughter Zion*; and the essays included in: Boda, Dempsey, and Snow Flesher, *Daughter Zion*.

¹⁷ Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion*, reads Lamentations as a place where Daughter Zion "talks back" to this abusive treatment. While I usually avoid masculine pronouns when referring to the deity, in these texts YHWH's gendered portrayal is so salient that I believe using 3ms pronouns, as the text does, is important.

¹⁸ Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 26.

¹⁹ Carroll, "The Myth of the Empty Land," argues that this vision of a completely desolate Jerusalem is an ideological construction by the biblical writers; for many of the peasants of Jerusalem, life after the Babylonian invasion continued pretty much as before.

and scorned by passers-by. And it is in these passages that it bears the closest resemblance to Silent Hill.

One of the most extensive descriptions of Jerusalem’s devastation is found in Jeremiah 4:23–26. Michael Fishbane noticed connections between this passage and Genesis 1, and labelled it an “uncreation hymn.”²⁰

In this passage, the prophet Jeremiah receives a vision of what Jerusalem, and all of Judah, will look like after the Babylon army has invaded:

Jer. 4:23 I looked on the earth,²¹ and lo, it was waste and void;
 and to the heavens, and they had no light.
24 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
 and all the hills moved to and fro.
25 I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
 and all the birds of the air had fled.
26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
 and all its cities were laid in ruins
 before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

The cities have become ruins, barren of inhabitants and even birds. The only noise is from the shaking of the mountains. It’s a vision of the bustling city of Jerusalem reduced to a wasteland, both the cities and the farmlands transformed into abandoned spaces. As opposed to the visions of Jerusalem as a city of refuge, as the joyous site of the presence of YHWH, this is a vision of a city laid waste and abandoned by an angry deity.

YHWH makes clear the reason for this divine wrath, and that YHWH is ultimately responsible for Jerusalem’s destruction. Earlier in Jeremiah 4, YHWH declares to the prophet:

20 Fishbane, “Jeremiah 4:23–26 and Job 3:3–13a.” Fishbane notes specific references to Genesis 1, most notably “waste and void” (Heb. תהו ובהו), referring to the state of the world prior to YHWH’s creation in Genesis 1:2. Blenkinsopp, “Cityscape to Landscape,” 35–44, refers to this as the “return to nature” theme, and notes that similar threats are laid by YHWH against a number of foreign cities in the various prophetic oracles against the nations.
21 Heb. הארץ, frequently used in specific reference to the land of Israel.

Jer 4:7 A lion has gone up from its thicket,
 a destroyer of nations has set out;
 he has gone out from his place
 to make your land a waste;
 your cities will be ruins
 without inhabitant.
8 Because of this put on sackcloth,
 lament and wail:
 “The fierce anger of the LORD
 has not turned away from us.”

The identity of the lion is not a mystery. The people understand this devastation as coming from “the fierce anger of the Lord” (4:8). And the image of the lion returns in other oracles, most clearly in 25:34–38, where YHWH warns the shepherds that the deity will rampage through the fields “like a lion,” “despoiling” the pastures and “devastating” the peaceful fields. The city of Jerusalem will be laid in ruins because of the anger of YHWH. Jeremiah 19 makes clear that the deity is responsible for the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The prophet is commanded to smash a pot in front of some of Jerusalem’s prominent priests, and to declare that God is about to smash Jerusalem just as Jeremiah smashed this vessel. The oracle ends with YHWH promising to bring “upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it” (19:15).

And the book of Jeremiah depicts this anger as being not without cause. In one of the infamous “marriage metaphors” of the prophetic literature, Jeremiah 2 depicts Jerusalem as the bride of YHWH, but one who is unfaithful and “went after worthless things, and became worthless [itself].”²² Jack Lundbom, preferring to use the term “The Nothing,” describes YHWH’s “grievance” as being that “he [YHWH] brought his people back from a desert into the veritable garden land they now inhabit, reversing the tragedy of Eden...but they re-

22 Jeremiah 2:5. The clause’s concluding pronoun is 3mp, since the address in 2:4 is to the “families of the house of Israel.” Of course, the literature on the “marriage metaphor,” whose examples include Hosea 1–2, Ezekiel 16 and 23, and Isaiah 54, is vast, especially as recent scholarship has explored the problematic nature of this comparison. See, for example: Weems, *Battered Love*; Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*; O’Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*.

paid the favor by making the place an unspeakable mess.”²³ It seems likely that “worthless things” is a reference to other gods, gods who do not actually exist in the worldview of Jeremiah and are hence nothing. This would mean that the primary charge of Jeremiah 2:5 is idolatry – Israel left exclusive worship of YHWH for worship of other gods.²⁴ In response to this unspeakable mess, YHWH turns the city into a site of destruction and abandonment.

On several occasions, YHWH threatens to transform Judah into an object of horror; this threat is, occasionally, directed specifically at the city of Jerusalem. The oracle of Jeremiah 19, briefly introduced above, is one of the clearest examples of this. After publicly smashing the vessel, Jeremiah proclaims (on YHWH’s behalf), that the deity is going to “make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters” (19:8). As Amy Kalmanofsky explains, this image of “hissing” is related to “indirect horror,” what she refers to as “the emotional reaction to the destruction.”²⁵ Jerusalem has been victimized, destroyed by the anger of YHWH, but because of the violence inflicted upon it the city becomes an object of horror for those who witness it. It both receives horror in the form of violence from YHWH, and produces horror through its status as desolated victim.

In these prophetic texts, we see Jerusalem in three main layers: we see the city as it was before the Babylonian invasion, a city of idolatry, social injustice, and general disregard for the commandments of YHWH and one’s fellow neighbor. And we see Jerusalem as it is envisioned in the future, sometimes with heavy eschatological overtones, and other times simply as a hopeful vision of communal life and relationship with the divine restored. But in between these two visions, the prophetic texts, especially Jeremiah, present a vision of Jerusalem as barren, lifeless, and hopeless. In these texts, there is no life in the city on a hill – and with even the birds shunning the cursed ground, there is nothing to hear but silence.

²³ Lundbom, *Jeremiah* 1–20, 262.

²⁴ This is also the root of YHWH’s charge of a broken marriage in many of the other marriage passages, such as Hosea 1–2, Ezekiel 16 and 23, and others.

²⁵ Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 31.

Cities of Guilt and Trauma

This contribution has explored how Jerusalem exists as a city of sin in the contemporary world of the prophets, and as a shining city on a hill in the imagined future. We have also seen how it exists in Israel’s imagination as a haunted, abandoned city that is a symbol of the people’s guilt and abandonment by their deity. When the psalmist of Psalm 137 proclaims, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!” (Psalm 137:5), he is almost certainly speaking from the perspective of the exile, when the memory of Jerusalem is both a nostalgic reminder of Israel’s past, and also a source of hope for a future in which the people are returned to their land and no longer subject to foreign rule. But for generations of readers, several different Jerusalems exist to be remembered, perhaps all three present at the same time. There is the Jerusalem of history, a reminder of the Israelites’ conquest of the land and status as the chosen people of YHWH.

There is the Jerusalem of the future, an image of hope and a longing for a future world where all are in harmony with God and wars have ceased. But hiding underneath these two remembrances is also the memory of the haunted city, a city abandoned by both God and the people for their sins. But even in this state of abandonment, the people feel continually drawn back to it, similar to the ways in which characters in the Silent Hill franchise who are tormented by their past traumas and misdeeds feel drawn back to the city of Silent Hill.

And in all of the instalments of Silent Hill, one of the consistent features is this haunted, nightmarish city that seems to respond directly to the trauma and guilt of those who visit it. While there is little to imply that a divine being oversees these machinations in Silent Hill, there nonetheless seems to be some intelligence conducting all of these nightmares, crafting each monster for a unique individual, but blending them all together in such a way as to allow these trapped souls to live through their particular nightmares together.

In the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible, the vision of a destroyed Jerusalem exists as a warning sign, a cautionary tale for all who would abandon the commandments of YHWH. But it also exists as a point in Israel’s collective im-

agination, a reminder of the journey they have been on and the trauma they have been through. In this, both Jerusalem and Silent Hill serve as the sites of these restless dreams, a way for people to try to face the guilt they fear for their actions, and the trauma they have experienced from both the world and the divine.

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A NEW EXODUS AND ITS NEW HOMELAND IN ISAIAH AND ‘METRO EXODUS’

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In recent decades the Exodus motif has played a crucial role in modern culture beyond the biblical texts, for instance in pictorial art,¹ novels,² movies³ and other forms of artistic expression across the world.⁴ The motif concerns the departure of the oppressed from enslavement to their enemy. The term ‘Exodus’ is derived from the Greek word *exodos*, which means ‘departure’ or ‘going out,’⁵ and it comes as little surprise that it is utilized for the title of the second book of the Hebrew Bible, since it focuses on the departure of the Israelites

¹ See for example: Cosimo Rosselli, *The Crossing of the Reed Sea* (1481–1482), fresco, Museum Sistine Chapel, Vatican City; Marc Chagall, *Exodus* (1952–1966), Saint-paul-de-venge, France. For a detailed discussion of the influence of the Exodus motif on pictorial art in the 19th century, see: Coltrin, “Picturing Political Deliverance.”

² See Uris, *Exodus*.

³ See, for instance: Jeffrey Katzenberg, Penney Finkelman Cox, Sandra Rabins, dir. *The Prince of Egypt* (Dream-Works Animation, 1998), and Ridley Scott dir., *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (20th Century Fox, 2014).

⁴ The Exodus motif has also had a significant impact on pop musicians, including the legendary Bob Marley. His iconic 1977 album, *Exodus*, drew inspiration from the biblical narrative of Moses leading the Israelites to freedom. According to the BBC, Bob Marley’s *Exodus* should be regarded as ‘an album that defined the 20th century’: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220215-bob-marleys-exodus-an-album-that-defined-the-20th-century>. For a full treatment of the reception history of the book of Exodus see: Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*; Kling, *The Bible in History*. On the Exodus in American history and culture, see: Hendel, “The Exodus in America.”

⁵ The Greek term *exodos* is employed as the title for the second book in the Septuagint.

from their bondage in Egypt and their subsequent arduous journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land named Canaan.⁶ The culmination of the Exodus is marked by the victory song of Moses (Ex. 15:1–20), who exuberantly celebrates the stunning event of the crossing of the Red Sea and the drowning of Egypt’s troops and horses. At the outset of the song, God is portrayed as a triumphant warrior who defeats the entire Egyptian army: “The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name” (Ex. 15:3). This imagery of the battle between God and His foe reoccurs in Isaiah 51:9–11 in a more dramatic manner that will be given careful consideration later.

Though the Exodus event is first recounted in the biblical narrative of Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, it is interesting to note that the motif is unambiguously revisited in other biblical books and video games in a different form, such as an eschatological vision or post-apocalyptic imagination. Notably, it plays a vital role in the book of Isaiah, especially in Isaiah 51:9–11, where the vision of Isaiah is intricately tied to the notion of a new Exodus and its new homeland in an eschatological context. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that the Exodus motif plays a central role in the Ukrainian first-person shooter game *Metro Exodus*, where it is intimately bound up with the concept of a new Exodus and its new resting place in the post-apocalyptic fantasy of an imaginary world. My primary concern here is to concentrate on a comparative examination of how the Exodus motif – with a particular focus on the new Exodus and its new homeland – is reinterpreted in a different way in both Isaiah’s eschatological vision and the post-apocalyptic video game. The present study has three main goals. Firstly, it will devote attention to a new Exodus from an anonymous monstrous enemy in Isaiah 51:9–11 and *Metro Exodus*. Secondly, it will focus on how each of the two resting places (Zion in Isaiah’s text and Lake Baikal in the video game) is characteristically presented in a distinct manner as a new homeland entirely free from any form of tyrannical oppression. Finally, it will seek to show how the significances of the Exodus motif for the text-im-

⁶ Over the past decades, there has been an intense debate among biblical scholars over the origin of the Exodus tradition. Countless attempts have been made in various ways to reconstruct the original setting of the tradition, while no scholarly agreement has yet been reached. Despite the discrepancies in reconstructing the origin and development of the Exodus tradition, it has been commonly acknowledged that the Exodus is concerned with a theological witness in history to the redemptive act of God on behalf of the ancient Israelites. For various approaches to the Exodus see: Janzen, Scott Stripling, Hoffmeier, Rendsburg, Feinman, and Hendel Janzen, *Five Views on the Exodus*.

manent audience and the player in the Isaianic text and the video game are understood in respective fashions in their own contexts.

The New Exodus in Isaiah’s Eschatological Vision and the Post-Apocalyptic Imagination of *Metro Exodus*

Without doubt, no motif or theme is more dominant in Isaiah 40–55 than the new Exodus. The escape of the Israelite captives from the bondage of Babylon is so central to this section of Isaiah that the Exodus motif plays a significant role in those chapters. Though the Exodus in Isaiah 40–55 clearly evokes the Exodus of the enslaved Israelites from the yoke of Egypt, it should be noted that the former unmistakably differs from the latter in the various ways it is described. In Isaiah 40–55 God will pave a way through the wilderness so that the captives in Babylon will return to Zion, while in the narrative of Moses God made a path through the Red Sea to facilitate the deliverance of the ancient Israelite slaves from the hands of the Egyptians. Interestingly, the prophet seeks to draw the contrast between them in this vein.

Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;
they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. (Isa. 43:16–19)

In addition, in Isaiah 40–55 God will appoint a non-Israelite figure – the Persian king Cyrus – as a redeemer to initiate the repatriation of Jewish captives from Babylon to Zion (44:28; 45:1), whereas in the days of the Exodus from Egypt God

called a Levite named Moses to lead the enslaved Israelites to Canaan. Given the remarkable comparison between “the things of Old” marked by the Exodus from Egypt and “a new thing” to come represented by the Exodus from Babylon in the aforementioned passage (Isa. 43:16–19), it is clear that the Exodus in the Isaianic chapters is never treated simply as a past event referring to the early foundational history of the ancient Israelites. Rather, it primarily refers to what is anticipated to take place for those who are enslaved by a new evil opponent in another foreign land. It is worth noting, what is more, that Isaiah 40–55 begins and concludes with the theme of a new Exodus (Isa. 40:3–5; 55:12–13), a fact that indicates that these passages are particularly concerned with the new Exodus.

More significantly, given the eschatological battle between God and an anonymous evil force represented by a primordial sea monster that is exclusively highlighted in Isaiah 51:9–11, it should be emphasized that the Exodus motif in the pericope plays a pivotal role in conveying an eschatological dimension of the Exodus that is nowhere to be seen in any other texts in Isaiah 40–55. Likewise, it needs to be stressed that at the end of the passage (Isa. 51:11), a gloriously elevated Zion is characterized as the final destination of the eschatological Exodus from the anonymous tyrant, an eschatological homeland completely free from any danger of oppression. Thus I will focus my attention on the concept of the new Exodus and its new homeland in Isaiah 51:9–11 later.

On the other hand, the Exodus motif can also be found in contemporary digital games. It is particularly prominent in *Metro Exodus* in which the motif plays a vital role in creating a new fantasy of the post-apocalyptic imagination. The video game is set in the winter of 2035 after the events of *Metro: Last Light*. The former Russian Federation has been devastated by nuclear warfare, and the story begins with a gloomy portrayal of the hazardous conditions in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the Earth’s surface, where survivors are faced with aggressive mutant animals. Due to these horrific circumstances, protagonist Artyom and other survivors are forced to take shelter in the Mosco Metro. Though the Metro is seen as a refuge from a nuclear war at the outset of the video game, it is depicted as a chaotic world of conflict in which Artyom is becoming disenchanted with his disorderly surroundings. What is worse,

the nameless leadership seeks to cordon off the entrance to the surface world, maintaining a closed subway system that leads the survivors to the misconception that the land outside remains uninhabitable. Artyom begins to wonder if no human exists outside the Metro, and he feels compelled to embark on expeditions toward the radioactive surface with a radio. His resolution to find a better life outside the Metro is well illustrated in his opening narration:

But I remember we were born for a better life, and I can’t accept that I’m destined to grow old and die underground. I don’t care if I’m called an idiot, but if even a single shard of the old world still exists out there, I have to find it. Between endless years of hopeless existence and even a single moment of hope, I must choose hope. I must find that signal!

This narration depicts the oppressive situation of the survivors in the cordoned-off Metro and shows that Artyom urgently wishes to escape this new form of oppression in his post-apocalyptic world. In this context, the escape of Artyom and his companions from the Metro is a new type of Exodus from a post-apocalyptic enslavement. Moreover, in the happy ending of the video game, Lake Baikal is presented as the final destination of the post-apocalyptic Exodus from the Metro where there is no danger of any form of oppression. Given these facts, I will compare the notion of a new Exodus and its new homeland in Isaiah 51:9–11 and *Metro Exodus*, thus providing an insight into how the Exodus motif is continuously taken up and reimagined in new contexts such as eschatological visions or post-apocalyptic fantasies. In order to do this, I will focus on the function of the text-immanent audience or player in the Isaianic text and the video game from a communication-oriented approach. The text-immanent audience-centered approach I take here differs from historical-critical readings that tend to be primarily concerned with reconstructing a real audience on the basis of the redactional history of a biblical text. In my view, the more historical critics passionately engage in reconstructing a real audience by looking at the historical development of the composition of the text, the more they inevitably create complexities, since the reconstruction of this hypothetical audience is not so much a reconstruction as a construction based on their own sophisticated but presuppositional conjectures.

This is not to say that historical research has no value. Indeed, there is little doubt that a careful inquiry into historical settings can play an important role in enriching the reader's understanding of a biblical text such as Isaiah, which is inseparably bound up with what was taking place in history. Nonetheless, it needs to be pointed out that redaction critics' various attempts to reconstruct the compositional history of Isaiah are highly hypothetical. As J.J.M. Roberts observes correctly, "the confidence with many modern scholars, who lack any datable manuscripts earlier than the final form of Isaiah, reconstruct hypothetical redactors living at particular periods, who make particular editorial changes in the service of some equally hypothetically reconstructed theological interest, strikes me as extreme hubris."⁷ For that reason, my emphasis is placed upon a synchronic approach that draws particular attention to the role of the text-immanent audience in the present form of the text as a unitary whole, an intended target audience that the author has in mind while writing. Thus I aim to examine the new Exodus and its new homeland in Isaiah and the video game from the perspective of the text-immanent audience or player.

A New Exodus from an Anonymous Monstrous Enemy in Isaiah and Metro Exodus

Over the past decades, there has been an increasing interest in apocalyptic dreams or fantasies which dominate the main storylines of various video games. As indicated above, the Exodus motif plays a pivotal role in many prominent video games, such as *The Last of Us*, *Halo*, *Mass Effect*, and *Metro Exodus*. Just as an evil power resembling a sea monster is portrayed as an eschatological instigator of chaos in the Isaianic text, so the Invisible Watchers are described as a post-apocalyptic instigator of chaos in *Metro Exodus*. It should be noted, furthermore, that each of these enemies is presented as an anonymous instigator of chaos in a different form in a world of oppression. So let us first concentrate on the enigmatic identity of the enemies when comparing the new Exodus in Isaiah 51:9–11 with that in *Metro Exodus*.

An Eschatological Exodus from an Anonymous Instigator of Chaos in Isaiah

⁷ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 3.

The new Exodus in Isaiah 40–55, especially Isaiah 51:9–11, is concerned with an eschatological escape from an anonymous instigator of chaos symbolized by a mythical sea monster that is nowhere to be found in Isaiah 40–55. Let us explore how the enigmatic monstrous oppressor is metaphorically described as a chaotic eschatological enemy in Isaiah's new Exodus by looking at James Nogalski's recent approach to the elusive identity of the unknown enemy in the text. In the many years that have elapsed since Bernhard Duhm's epochal commentary on Isaiah, a large number of Isaianic exegetes have uncompromisingly clung to the long-held hypothesis that Isaiah 40–55 was written by an anonymous author labelled Second or Deutero-Isaiah who lived with the exiles in Babylon. Consequently, it has been taken for granted that the audience addressed in Isaiah 51:9–11 is in exile and that Babylon is presented as their enemy in the text.

No matter how the final composition of Isaiah 40–55 took place, this critical approach to those chapters including Isaiah 51:9–11 has remained influential in Isaianic studies. Over the last few decades, however, this traditional approach to Isaiah 40–55 has been challenged by several scholars who have rejected the prevailing assumption that the enemy of the audience in the text must have been Babylon. Among the most prominent of these scholars is Nogalski, whose recent observation regarding the identity of the addressee in Isaiah 40–55 merits careful consideration. His chief concern is to distinguish between two divergent addressees by examining changes in perspective on space and time in the chapters in question. According to Nogalski, the addressee in Isaiah 40–48 is frequently referred to as 'Jacob/Israel', who is waiting for their return from Babylon to Zion, while the audience addressed in Isaiah 49–55 is mainly presented as 'Lady Zion', a term for the personified city of Jerusalem that represents those who inhabit the city. He goes on to assert:

Thus, like chs. 40–48, chs. 49–55 require persuasion. In the former [chs. 40–48], the message focuses upon persuading the people to return. In the latter [chs. 49–55], Jerusalem herself must be persuaded that the people are coming and that resources are forthcoming. She must be persuaded to see YHWH's hand at work bringing home her children.⁸

⁸ Nogalski, "Changing Perspectives in Isaiah 40–55," 223.

Though the terms ‘Jacob/Israel’ reappear in the opening section of Isaiah 49, Nogalski suggests that their occurrence merely signifies a transitional function of the unit between Isaiah 40–48 and 49–55. Hence, according to Nogalski, the divergent references to the addressee within Isaiah 40–55 – ‘Jacob/Israel’ in Isaiah 40–48, and ‘Lady Zion’ in Isaiah 49–55 – demonstrate that the former is identical with the deportees in Babylon, while the latter refers to a Judahite audience in Jerusalem. This being the case, Isaiah 51:9–11 needs to be treated as a passage presuming a Jerusalemite setting. This fact indicates that the enemy in the text can no longer be identified with Babylon. Consequently, Nogalski asserts that the only option for the identity of the enemy should be those who remained in Jerusalem. Though Nogalski’s carefully considered argument in favor of a Judahite setting for Isaiah 49–55 including Isaiah 51:9–11 deserves consideration, I am reluctant to accommodate his thesis that two divergent audiences and their enemies are addressed in Isaiah 40–55. In particular, I am not concerned with engaging in an endlessly contentious debate over the identity of the enemy by reconstructing the redactional history of the text from the perspective of critics’ presuppositional premises. Instead, my sympathy lies with a holistic approach which seeks to interpret the text as it stands and to deal with it as a unitary whole from the perspective of the text-immanent audience (hereafter the audience) – a synchronic reading that has been gaining an increasing number of adherents for the past several decades. Here particular attention will be given to the literary context of Isaiah’s vision of a new Exodus in Isaiah 51:9–11, where the enemy is anonymously depicted as an instigator of chaos represented by a primordial sea dragon.

It is noteworthy that, in the literary context of the cosmogonic language of Isa. 51:9–11, the Exodus motif is intimately tied to the image of God as the Divine Warrior who defeats a chaotic sea monster. Significantly, such a combination of the Exodus with the cosmic combat motif in Isaiah 51:9–11 is nowhere to be seen in the book of Isaiah, and this distinctive characteristic merits further elaboration. It is widely believed among Isaianic scholars that Isaiah 51:9–11 belongs to the second subsection (51:9–16) of a larger single unit (51:1–52:12) containing four smaller segments (51:1–8; 51:9–16; 51:17–23; 52:1–12). However, the strategic location of the repeated imperative (עִירִי) “awake” (51:9, 17, 52:1), which plays a crucial role in introducing what follows, suggests that 51:9–11 forms the

opening subsection of the unit extending to 52:6 or 12. Let us focus in particular on the initial occurrence of this repeated exhortation to “awake” in Isaiah 51:9–11, where God is portrayed as the Divine Warrior who valiantly slays a chaotic sea monster named Rahab.

The repeated verb עִיר in Isaiah 51:9 is directly addressed to the arm of God, who appears to remain silent and inactive despite the unceasing outcry of the oppressed. As the subsequent words “arm” (זְרוֹעַ) and “put on” (לְבִישׁ) clearly echo ancient military contexts in which warriors equip themselves with weapons and armor, it seems God is being exhorted to take military action against the opponent on behalf of his people, just as He defeated the Egyptian armies at the Rea Sea. It is interesting to observe that the exhortation to “awake” and the reference to “the arm” of God in Isaiah 51:9 is reminiscent of the Psalms of communal lament, particularly of Psalm 44, which begins with an invocation of the arm of God who has defeated the nations (44:2–3) and ends with an appeal for God to “rise up” (44:26). Indeed, the Psalmist draws attention to how God miraculously delivered the nation from the hands of enemies in the past, and wonders why He now remains unresponsive to the cry of His people. Then he concludes the lament with an exhortation to take immediate action on their behalf. In a similar vein, the petitioner in Isaiah 51:9–11 is longing for divine intervention which will ultimately result in the complete destruction of the monstrous opponent, like Egypt in the days of the crossing of the Rea Sea.

At this stage, it is worth noting that the text does not mention the name of the enemy, nor does it provide any decisive clues regarding the historical setting for the enemy. Indeed, the identity of the opponent remains ambiguous in the text, an identity that can never be confined to a certain historical figure or group. This anonymity of the enemy alludes to the fact that the Exodus motif is adopted and reinterpreted eschatologically so that it is transformed into a new Exodus from an unknown evil force of chaos. Regardless of the lack of precise information on the enemy given in the literary context of Isaiah’s new Exodus, however, the vision of Isaiah signifies that the audience is experiencing a great deal of chaos and conflict instigated by the monstrous enemy. Thus, notwithstanding any disorder and upheaval, the significance of the core message of the new Exodus to the audience is obvious. No matter what tyrannical

oppression they may suffer, and no matter how grave their overwhelmingly chaotic situation may be, the audience is urged not only to yearn for God's impending intervention to thwart the monstrous instigator of chaos, but also to anticipate their participation in the eschatological restoration of Zion.

It ought to be emphasized, what is more, that the metaphorical portrayal of a sea monster-like enemy of chaos in an eschatological Exodus is continuously reinterpreted in a new context in which a new instigator of chaos is anonymously described as a formidable sea dragon. This being the case, it comes as little surprise that an unnamed chaotic enemy is also portrayed as "a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns" (Revelation 12:3) in a new apocalyptic context. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that the Invisible Watchers in the video game are depicted as a monstrous instigator of chaos in a post-apocalyptic context. Thus I will now turn my focus to the new Exodus from the Invisible Watchers, whose secret manipulation of the Metro is understood as a new form of oppression in a post-apocalyptic imaginary world.

A Post-Apocalyptic Exodus from an Anonymous Instigator of Chaos in *Metro Exodus*

The last few decades have seen a growing interest in post-apocalyptic fantasy and fiction – a trend which is particularly evident in movies and video games. However, unlike a myriad of post-apocalyptic games that are based on American or Western films, books, and comics, *Metro Exodus* is primarily inspired by a series of novels from Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky. At the outset of the video game, the Metro is described as an entirely disordered underground city overwhelmed by a clash of ideologies and serious conflict caused by the Invisible Watchers. Let us look in greater detail at the portrayal of the Invisible Watchers as a nameless oppressive instigator of chaos secretly manipulating the inter-faction conflict in the Metro, paying particular attention to the fate of the city of Novosibirsk.

As Artyom and Miller visit the city of Novosibirsk, they coincidentally meet a young boy named Kirill, the last known survivor in the Novosibirsk Metro

who provides them with detailed information on the fate of the underground city. Those who survived a potent cobalt bomb decimating the city of Novosibirsk sought to find shelter in the Metro, which was under the control of a Russian military unit named OSKOM. During the violent clash between the leadership and civilians in the Metro, Kirill's father Khlebnikov – who had been commanded to subdue the rioters – came to learn from another high ranking-OSKOM member by the name of General Vinogradov that the highest OSKOM officials had decided to evacuate without them. Feeling betrayed by the officials, Vinogradov committed suicide after destroying the evacuation train in order to prevent the officials' evacuation process.

Eventually all the civilians died except for two survivors in the Novosibirsk Metro – Khlebnikov and his son Kirill. Khlebnikov succumbed to radiation sickness a month prior to the arrival of the Aurora crew, leaving his son alone. As Artyom and Miller learn about the fate of the Novosibirsk Metro, the true colors of the Invisible Watchers are fully revealed. That is to say, they become aware that the Invisible Watchers are the ringleaders responsible for instigating a ceaseless conflict between the major parties in the Mosco Metro, a hidden but meticulously planned tactic that is designed for population control in the Mosco Metro.

Here we may note two critical functions of the inter-faction conflict manipulated by the unnamed antagonist. Firstly, the nameless enemy sees the strife between the parties as necessary, since it helps to prevent the kind of highly volatile situation which could lead to a tragic catastrophe like the collapse of the Novosibirsk Metro. There a head-to-head clash between the leadership and the civilians had devastating results, namely, the total destruction of population. Skillfully, the Invisible Watchers seek to do the precise opposite of the OSKOM officials in the Novosibirsk Metro. Unlike the OSKOM leadership, who actively engaged in a direct conflict with civilians, they are covertly involved in splitting the Mosco Metro into several factions behind the scenes, a separation that ultimately results in keeping people's attention divided so that any single side cannot be an easy scapegoat for the Metro's problems. In their judgement, the regular inter-party clash plays a crucial role in preventing the survivors in the Metro from being completely wiped out, as was the tragic case of the Metro in Novosibirsk.

Secondly, the Invisible Watchers understand that the inter-party conflict plays a key role in keeping the number of inhabitants in the Metro manageable. On the one hand, they feel obliged to maintain a certain number of people to protect the Metro from attacks by various mutants. On the other hand, they find it of vital importance to minimize the population numbers so that they can control the daily necessities. Thus it is the anonymous enemy's unwavering conviction that without the chaotic strife between the parties, it would be impossible to stave off the hazard of the entire destruction of the Metro population. In this respect, the Invisible Watchers are undoubtedly described as an oppressive instigator of chaos whose secret manipulation of population control in the chaotic Metro can be understood as a new form of oppression in a post-apocalyptic fantasy.

Artyom's recognition of the concealed identity of the Invisible Watchers as a monstrous instigator of chaos in the Metro is of particular significance for the text-immanent player (hereafter the player) who is invited to play as Artyom in the video game. As the player takes on the role of Artyom in the Novosibirsk Metro, he or she comes to the awareness that without a drastic escape from the fabricated and conflict-ridden Metro, he or she would have remained blinded to the reality of what is happening in the Metro. Indeed, it is not until the player reaches the Novosibirsk Metro that he or she realizes the hidden tactic utilized by the Invisible Watchers for population control in the Mosco Metro. Thus the significance of the courageous flight from the Metro and the desperate journey on the train is evident for the player, as he or she confronts the challenges and dangers of survival in the post-apocalyptic world. No matter how great the hardship and adversity faced by the player during the train journey, such an audacious adventure and challenge leads him or her to a discovery of real freedom and the concealed truth.

A New Homeland in Isaiah and *Metro Exodus*

Thus far I have shown how an anonymous enemy is characteristically pictured as a tyrannical oppressor in both Isaiah 51:9–11 and *Metro Exodus*. Given the fact that the Isaianic text and the video game are mainly concerned with a grim

situation in which people are being oppressed by a monstrous instigator of chaos, it is noteworthy that each of them concludes with a spectacular future for a new homeland that is the final destination of a new Exodus. Specifically, both locations (Zion in Isa. 51:9–11 and Lake Baikal in *Metro Exodus*) are comparably presented as new resting places that are completely free from danger of any form of oppression. Given this fact, I shall now focus attention on how a chaotic Zion, in which the people are groaning under the weight of oppression by a chaotic monstrous enemy, is transformed into a new homeland of eschatological rest and peace.

From an Oppressed City to an Eschatological Homeland in Isaiah

In Isaiah's vision of an eschatological Exodus in Isaiah 51:9–11, the once-exalted Zion is now portrayed as an oppressed city overwhelmed by massive chaos caused by an anonymous monstrous enemy. Yet it is significant that the last section of the vision leads to a dramatic shift towards a remarkable hope for the renewal of an eschatological Zion. In other words, unlike the ill-fated condition of the present chaotic Zion set forth in the preceding verses, the final verse of the text (Isa. 51:11) presents a brighter picture of Zion, vividly described as the final destination of an eschatological Exodus. Thus I wish to take a closer look at the eschatological portrait of Zion as a new homeland in the closing verse.

It is interesting to note that some scholars seek to treat Isaiah 51:9–11 in the light of Isaiah 35:1–10, since the former shares the notion of a new Exodus with the latter. To be precise, the eschatological picture of Zion in the former unmistakably echoes the restoration of the city in the latter, a thematic resemblance between the two passages that has been the subject of a great deal of discussion among Isaianic scholars. Given the fact that the closing verse of the former (51:11) is identical with that of the latter (35:10), moreover, it comes as little surprise that a number of commentators, especially redaction critics, are actively engaged in reconstructing the compositional history of those texts. For instance, many exegetes have suggested that the last verse of Isaiah 51:9–11 is taken from a part of Isaiah 35:1–10, while others call into question whether

this verse originally belongs to Isaiah 35, and propose instead a somewhat different option for the composition of Isaiah 35. It appears to me that the question as to whether the notion of the restoration of Zion in Isaiah 51:11 derives from the material in Isaiah 35 or vice versa remains controversial, and it seems all but impossible to reach anything resembling a scholarly consensus on this matter. Instead, as indicated earlier, my reading of the Isaianic text (Isa. 51:9–11) is more concerned with a synchronic approach that seeks to interpret it as it stands from the perspective of the text-immanent audience. My attention will be focused on how an oppressed Zion is gloriously transformed into a new location of eschatological hope and peace in the present literary context of the text.

As mentioned earlier, the lament in Isaiah 51:9–11 alludes to the fact that the audience is experiencing a chaotic circumstance in Zion where they are now being subjugated by the anonymous tyrannical enemy. This oppressive condition is further elucidated by the words “sorrow” (גִּיּוֹן) and “sighing” (אֲנָה) expressing a hopeless situation in the last verse of the passage (Isa. 51:11), and especially by the reference to “the oppressor” (מַצְרִיָּק) which is found twice in what immediately follows (Isa. 51:13). In contrast, the closing verse begins with the return of the exiles to Zion, which serves as a prelude to the renewal of the city. It has been widely acknowledged by scholars that given the expression “those ransomed by the Lord” (פְּדוּיֵי יְהוָה) that appears at the outset of Isa. 51:11, the returning exiles need to be identified with the addressee of the closing verse. As observed earlier, in the last few years, however, several scholars have been reluctant to accommodate such a traditional approach, proposing instead a somewhat divergent option for who is addressed in the verse.

No matter how the addressee of Isaiah 51:9–11 is identified in various ways, it should be stressed that the eschatological portrayal of Zion in the passage leads to the fact that the city of God can on no account be reduced to any specific historical location. To put it another way, just as a nameless oppressor resembling a sea monster in Isaiah 51:9–10 is presented as an eschatological character, so Zion in Isaiah 51:11 is depicted as an eschatological homeland of peace and rest. When the exiles return to Zion, it will be transformed into a new resting place. As Brevard Childs correctly points out, “Verses 9ff [Isa. 51:9–11], thus, emerge

as the voice of the new people of God, who now bring forth a prayer for God finally to usher in the long awaited eschatological hope of joy and gladness.”⁹ In this respect, the eschatological vision of the return to Zion in Isaiah 51:9–11 has immense significance for the audience. Indeed, no matter how devastating the chaotic condition in Zion may be, the audience is encouraged to continue longing for God’s immediate intervention to deliver the oppressed city from the chaotic monstrous enemy and to anticipate the establishment of a new Zion as a homeland that is entirely free from any danger of oppression.

From a Chaotic Metro to a Post-Apocalyptic Homeland in *Metro Exodus*

I now wish to shift my focus from Zion as an eschatological homeland to Lake Baikal as a post-apocalyptic homeland in *Metro Exodus*. Special attention will be paid to the happy ending of the video game in which Miller guides Artyom in a dream to Lake Baikal, which serves as their final destination for escaping from the Metro. Before delving into Artyom’s dream in the ending, it is important to first understand how Artyom came to realize the dominant role the Invisible Watchers play in manipulating the Metro from behind the scenes. This fact shows that the Metro is nothing more than an oppressed city full of fabricated stories, covertly controlled by the unknown enemy. As Miller joins the journey with Artyom and his daughter Anna, he confesses that he used to be in direct contact with the Invisible Watchers, who claim to be a remnant of the pre-war government. He goes on to acknowledge that he already knew about the attempt to block all communications from outside radio broadcasts. According to Miller, the Invisible Watchers told him that the war had never ended, and that NATO had occupied many Russian cities. In addition, they informed Miller that the Russian national government still exists at the ‘Ark’, a massive underground bunker located beneath Mount Yamantau, and that the central command of the government continues to send orders to the Invisible Watchers.

When Artyom arrives at the Yamantau base with their allies, however, Artyom and Miller find that the Russian government had never been established

⁹ Childs, *Isaiah*, 404.

at the Ark, and that no order from the command was given to the Invisible Watchers. In their eyes, this bunker is nothing but a den of cannibals who used to be construction workers, non-military personnel and officials. Eventually it turns out that all information on the links with the central command from the Invisible Watchers is completely fictitious. The reality is that the Invisible Watchers have provided Miller with such disinformation on the Ark facility so that they can continue to control Miller and his Spartans. At this stage, the dreadful truth is beginning to come out about what happened in the console room of the Metro, where Artyom and Anna had earlier discovered a signal jammer that was jamming all communications in and out of the Metro. It is not true, as claimed by the Invisible Watchers, that the radio jammers in the room were installed to hide the Metro from the outside world, particularly from any additional attacks by NATO. Rather, the opposite is truth. In fact, the broadcast jammers were installed to prevent the Metro's inhabitants from contacting the outside world, thus effectively keeping them isolated in the underground city. In this regard, the sealed-off subway system filled with fabricated tales and the unknown enemy's secret manipulation of the Metro, in which most of the survivors are unaware that they are being treated like puppets and completely brainwashed by the unnamed enemy, can be regarded as a new type of oppression in a post-apocalyptic world of imagination.

On the other hand, the last part of the video game, especially the happy ending of the game, turns the focus from Artyom and his crews' journey on the train to their final destination of escape from the Metro, namely Lake Baikal. This ending begins with the sad death of Miller, who sacrifices himself by giving Artyom his last dose of anti-radiation drug. Though the crew companions find Artyom alive and the medicine Anna needs, Artyom immediately lapses into an unconscious state. As Artyom hovers between life and death, Miller appears before Artyom in a dream and confesses that, at first, he used to take a dim view of Artyom's attempt to flee the Metro. However, Miller goes on to express great regret for his hesitance to escape from the disorderly underground city. He states:

Look, Artyom ... Lake Baikal ... makes you believe real life is possible, not the petty rat race we had back in the Metro... I just have to say, you were

right, Artyom, right for wanting to get us out, bring us here. And I, the old fool ... I was simply afraid ... afraid of life, as I see now...The world is worth giving everything up for, Artyom ... You were always ready ... and I ... was too attached to my position ... in the rat race.

Though Miller laments in the dream that he lacked the courage to escape from the Metro's rat race, he encourages Artyom to seek real life at Lake Baikal that is completely free from any hazards of radiation exposure. Notably, Miller's last words motivate Artyom to extricate the survivors from the Metro and to usher them to Lake Baikal. These last statements made by Miller are of vital significance to the player. Indeed, like Artyom, the player is urged to take immediate action on behalf of the survivors in the Metro who are being oppressed by the deceptive tactics used by the Invisible Watchers, who seek to control them with false information. As the happy ending of the game reaches its climax, the player becomes aware that Lake Baikal is not merely the final destination of the escape from the chaotic Metro and the long arduous journey on the train, but also a new post-apocalyptic resting place for the oppressed in the underground city – a new homeland entirely free from the danger of oppressive manipulation and fabricated tales by the Invisible Watchers. Thus, for the player, finding the new homeland is not the end of the Exodus, but a new starting point for another Exodus to come.

Concluding Remarks: The Exodus – To Be Continued...

As I have demonstrated, the notion of a new Exodus and a new homeland plays a prominent role in both Isaiah 51:9–11 and *Metro Exodus*, and both the biblical text and the video game can be understood in terms of the ongoing reception of the Exodus motif. In both cases the motif is reinterpreted in a new situation in which a new Exodus and a new homeland are understood in a markedly different manner. For instance, in the video game, the Exodus is not just an escape from a chaotic atmosphere caused by a sea monster-like enemy described in Isaiah 51:9–11, but rather from a closed subway system that blocks people from the outside, covertly manipulated by the Invisible Watchers. In addition, whereas in Isaiah 51:9–11, a restored Zion is depicted as a new home-

land to which the exiles are willing to return, in the video game Lake Baikal is described as a new resting place to which the survivors are going to flee.

This being the case, it is important to note that the significance of the Isaianic text for the audience considerably differs from that of the video game for the player. More specifically, in the eschatological vision of Isaiah's new Exodus, the audience is invited to call on God to hear their lament amid a chaotic condition and to confound the enemy so that their present city is restored as a new homeland. Thus, the significance of the eschatological vision for the audience is patent. No matter what overwhelming chaos they face in this hard time, they are in need of a glimpse of an elevated Zion as a new homeland from the chaos of the city.

By contrast, in the post-apocalyptic imagination of the video game, the player is not motivated to stay and await a rejuvenation of the dimly lit underground city. Rather, the player feels obliged to take urgent action to flee the cordoned-off subway system. Thus, the significance of the post-apocalyptic imagination for the player is obvious. No matter what obstacles may hinder them, the player is in desperate need of escaping from the chaotic subway city. In this regard, the significance of Isaiah's vision for the audience and that of the video game for the player unmistakably differ. To put it another way, the city known as Zion in Isaiah 51:9–11 is a place of restoration for the audience, whereas the city named the Mosco Metro in the video game serves as a location to be escaped for the player. Above all, in the eschatological vision of Isaiah, God is depicted as the divine warrior who will solely vanquish the chaotic evil force and usher in an epoch-making era for the city of Zion, while in the post-apocalyptic video game, particularly in the happy ending of the game, Artyom is portrayed as a hero expected to return and deliver the exiles out of the disorderly Metro manipulated by the Invisible Watchers. Despite the differences in significance, both the audience and the player come to the same realization: because an anonymous monstrous oppressor seeks to exert control by any means of oppression necessary, thus creating a perilous chaotic atmosphere, a new Exodus from the enemy is imperative. Wherever a monstrous enemy exists, whether in an eschatological context or in a post-apocalyptic digital world, the Exodus is not just an event faded in the past but becomes an ongoing reality to be experienced. The Exodus – to be continued...

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‘BY THE HOME WORLD I HOPE TO SEE ONE DAY’

BIBLICAL THEMES OF EXILE AND RETURN IN MASS EFFECT

Rebekah Van Sant and Frank G. Bosman

The statement ‘Home is a state of mind’ from Tali’Zorah from the first instalment of the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare, 2007, 2010, 2012) encapsulates the Quarians’ experience of resilience in the face of becoming displaced from their home world, and it also communicates that one can find home even in exile. Where home is and how one relates to one’s homeland are complicated – there can be longing, hope of return, experiences of marginalisation in displacement, and also new possibilities and thriving outside of the homeland.

The themes of exile and displacement are deeply embedded in biblical literature (such as the Exodus and the Babylonian Exile). They have had significant impact on popular culture that continues to draw on biblical themes. Similarly, the *Mass Effect* series constructs a narrative world where themes of exile, homecoming, and redemption define the histories and struggles of various peoples. In *Mass Effect* the player, as Commander Shepard, has a direct way of influencing the outcome of the Quarians’ future, the Geth, humanity, as well as other peoples in the narrative world.

This essay explores such parallels between the portrayals of exile and displacement between the *Mass Effect* series and biblical texts where exile and homecoming are prominent themes, focusing on the Quarians as a case study of a displaced people that are comparable with the Israelite experience in the Exodus and Babylonian exile (e.g., Exodus 12–15, 2 Kings 24–25, Jeremiah 29, Psalm 137).¹ Furthermore, in *Mass Effect*'s silent protagonist Shepard, the essay examines the broader theological implications of the model of exile and return in biblical tradition, such as divine punishment, redemption, and the role of a mediator, comparing figures such as Moses and Cyrus with Commander Shepard's role in the *Mass Effect* trilogy.

Defining video games as 'digitally mediated ludo-narrative texts',² we explore in this contribution the relationship between various biblical texts concerning these themes of exile, homecoming, and divine protection through the portrayal of the Quarians in *Mass Effect*. Secondly, we will discuss the image of the shepherd as it relates to the characterisation of *Mass Effect*'s protagonist (Commander Shepard) to explore how the trilogy also draws on themes of exile where divinely chosen messengers/mediators often facilitate redemption and homecoming. But first, we will introduce the world of *Mass Effect* generally and that of the Quarians specifically. As a last step we will relate those two themes in relationship to one another.

The *Mass Effect* trilogy

The *Mass Effect* trilogy presents a heavy-handed science fiction narrative in which the central theme is the confrontation between organic life and artificial intelligence, framed within the larger cosmic cycle of extinction orchestrated by the Reapers, a race of ancient machine intelligences. The Reapers embody the paradox of preservation through destruction: they periodically return to the galaxy to eradicate advanced civilizations, assimilating their cultural and biological uniqueness into synthetic forms, thereby ensuring that life never advances beyond a threshold that might destabilize the universe. This cycle is re-

vealed only gradually to Commander Shepard and the player during the three instalments. The Reapers' intervention is not merely external violence but a structural principle of galactic history, repeating with each rise and fall of civilizations, as exemplified by the fate of the Protheans, who had once flourished before being repurposed as Collectors.

Against this backdrop unfolds the ethical and political drama of coexistence between organics and synthetics, most sharply symbolized in the conflict between the Quarians and their creations, the Geth. The Quarians' fear of their own machines led to a genocidal attempt at extermination, while the Geth sought autonomy and survival, raising the question of whether artificial beings can and should be integrated into the community of life. This conflict mirrors the larger tension of the Reapers' claim: that organic and synthetic life are fundamentally incompatible, and that only through cyclical annihilation and transformation can balance be preserved. Shepard's struggle to resolve the Geth-Quarian war thus functions as a microcosm of the trilogy's meta-story, demonstrating that the survival of the galaxy depends on the capacity of diverse forms of existence to transcend cycles of mistrust and violence.

Throughout the trilogy, Shepard's role becomes that of a 'disruptor'. Whereas the Reapers represent the weight of history and the repetition of extinction, Shepard embodies the possibility of rupture, of breaking the cycle of periodically mass extinction. Yet the culmination of the narrative, in the construction of the Crucible and its activation, returns the player to the same fundamental dilemma: whether to destroy the Reapers at the cost of annihilating synthetic life, to seize control of them and perpetuate their logic under human command, or to synthesize organic and artificial existence into a new hybrid form. Each option echoes the central themes of the trilogy – destruction, domination, or cooperation – and forces the recognition that no resolution is unambiguous.

The portrayal of the Quarians

The Quarians are a nomadic species in the *Mass Effect* universe, exiled from their home world, Rannoch, following their failed attempt to suppress the sentient AI race they created known as the Geth. The Geth ultimately won the con-

¹ Translations of the Hebrew text are taken from the JPS unless stated otherwise.

² Bosman and Van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art*.

flict, forcing the surviving Quarians to flee their home world and live aboard a fleet of ships called the 'Migrant Fleet', where they remain when the player encounters them in the *Mass Effect* series.

The Geth originated as networked artificial intelligences designed by the Quarians as a labour force to manage their rapidly advancing technological infrastructure. Initially conceived as non-sentient programs optimized for efficiency, the Geth gradually developed self-awareness as their neural networks became increasingly complex and interlinked. The turning point occurred when some Geth began to ask philosophical questions - most famously, 'Does this unit have a soul?' - which revealed emergent consciousness beyond their creators' intentions. The Quarians, fearing the prospect of a machine uprising, attempted to pre-emptively exterminate their creations. The Geth resisted successfully, driving the Quarians from their home world, Rannoch. This act of self-defence established them as an autonomous synthetic species, but their origin story remained defined by the traumatic rupture with their creators and the persistent organic fear of artificial life surpassing its initial design.

Following their expulsion from Rannoch, the Quarians became a nomadic people, living aboard a 'Migrant Fleet', a vast flotilla of starships that sustained their entire population for a very long time. The Fleet served simultaneously as home, government, and cultural repository. Because of the compromised immune systems that resulted from life in sterile, enclosed environments aboard the space fleet, Quarians must wear protective suits outside their ships, a feature that symbolizes both their vulnerability and their reliance on technology to survive. Politically, the Migrant Fleet is governed through the Admiralty Board, reflecting a militarized yet fragile society forced to constantly negotiate resources and survival. Social cohesion depended on the shared memory of the exile, with the hope of one day retaking Rannoch functioning as a unifying aspiration. Thus, the Migrant Fleet is not merely a logistical adaptation but a cultural (self) identity, that is, to long for the return 'home'.

The portrayal of Shepard in the *Mass Effect* trilogy

Commander Shepard is the central protagonist of the *Mass Effect* trilogy and functions as the player's avatar within the game's narrative universe. Shepard is a human military officer whose actions, decisions, and moral orientation determine both the trajectory of the story and the fate of the galaxy in the struggle against the Reapers. As the first human to be inducted into the elite interspecies task force known as the Spectres, Shepard becomes an important figure mediating between humanity and the wider galactic community.

Crucially, Shepard is not a fixed character, but rather a customizable protagonist. At the outset of the trilogy, the player chooses Shepard's gender, background, and class specialization, which affect not only combat style but also narrative interactions. Shepard can therefore be male or female, a flexibility that extends to voice acting and to romantic subplots, which vary according to the chosen gender and the player's relationship decisions. This design choice underscores *Mass Effect*'s ludo-narrative emphasis on agency: Shepard's identity is not entirely pre-scripted but co-constructed through player engagement.

Despite this variability, Shepard retains a consistent narrative function. Shepard is the focal point of resistance against the Reapers, the unifying agent capable of negotiating fragile alliances among diverse species, including the Geth and the Quarians, and the decision-maker at pivotal junctures in the story.

Biblical themes

As indicated in the introduction, the *Mass Effect* series feature many biblical themes, including – as is the focus of this chapter – (1) exile and homecoming and (2) the image of the shepherd, who tends to his flock. We will introduce both themes below.

Exile and Homecoming: Exile as Divine Punishment

Exile and return are prominent themes in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and as a sacred text for Judaism and Christianity these themes have continued to exert cultural influence. Exile is often presented as a form of punishment for breaking the covenant between God and the people. For instance, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile are framed in 2 Kings 24–25 as consequences of Judah’s failure to uphold the covenant with God:

כִּי עַל־אַף יְהוָה הָיְתָה בִּירוּשָׁלַם וּבִיהוּדָה עַד־הַשְׁלֹכוֹ אֹתָם מֵעַל פָּנָיו

Because of the anger of the LORD, this happened in Jerusalem and Judah, until He cast them out of His presence. (2 Kings 24:20)

Subsequently, the potential return to the land and ingathering of the diaspora is often indicative of divine forgiveness and restoration of the divine’s relationship with the people after exile.³ Scholars such as Robert Carroll have even described the Hebrew Bible itself as “the book of exile”, as well as “the great metanarrative of deportation, exile and potential return”, noting that this theme begins with Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis up to the book of Chronicles.⁴

A notable literary expression of these themes is the psalmist’s lament in Psalm 137 for Zion (Jerusalem) upon being exiled to Babylon. Verses one and four are notable examples of a lament for Zion that reflect on the difficulty of being in exile, reflecting on the possibility of singing the Lord’s song on foreign soil, and the importance of remembering Zion.

עַל נְהָרוֹת בָּבֶל שָׁם יִשְׁכְּנוּ גַם־כִּכְיָנוּ בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן:² עַל־עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תִּלְיֵנוּ כְּנָרוֹתֵינוּ:³ כִּי שָׁם שָׁאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְּבַר־יִשְׁרָאֵל וְתוֹלְדֵינוּ שָׁמָּה שִׁיר לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן:⁴ אִיךָ נִשְׁיֵר אֶת־שִׁיר־יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נָכָר:⁵ אִם־אֶשְׁפָּחֵךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁפָּח יְמִינִי:⁶ תִּדְבַּק־לִשׁוֹנִי לַחֲכִי אִם־לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶכִי אִם־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֹתִי:

³ Van Sant, *Poetics of Exile and Diaspora*; see also Scott, *Exile*.

⁴ Carroll, “Deportation and Diasporic Discourses.”

¹By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.
²There on the poplars we hung up our lyres, ³for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” ⁴How can we sing a song of the LORD on alien soil? ⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; ⁶let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.

The longing for a return from exile, is also present in Psalm 126, where the psalmist expresses this longing as a dream coming true in verse one:

בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה אֶת־שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֻלְמִים:

When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion—we see it as in a dream—

In contrast with Psalm 137, tongues will be filled with songs of joy upon return in verses five to six:

הַהֲרַע בְּאִיבּוֹא בְּרָנָה נִשְׂא אֲלֻמֹּתָיו: הַזֹּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרָנָה יִקְצְרוּ:⁶ הַלּוֹךְ יֵלֵךְ וּבָכָה נִשְׂא מִשָּׂדֶה

⁵They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy. ⁶Though he goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag, he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves.

While displacement is sometimes presented as a form of divine punishment, there are counterexamples that present life outside of the homeland not as absent of divine presence. Jeremiah reframes exile as diaspora: a liveable, even productive condition where one works for the good of the host society.⁵ For example, in Jeremiah 29:4–7, the prophet advises the exiles to settle and “seek the welfare of the city to which I [God] have exiled you” (וַדַּרְשׁוּ אֶת־שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר) (הַגָּלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה). Additionally, Michael Knibb discusses how texts from the Second Temple period reuse the seventy-year prophecy concerning the end of exile from the book of Jeremiah, such as the book of Daniel (Jeremiah 25:11–12; cf. Daniel 9:20–23). Knibb concludes that, “all [these texts] seem to share the

⁵ Heschel and Weidner, “An Exile of the Soul,” 15.

view that Israel remained in a state of exile long after the sixth century, and that the exile would only be brought to an end when God intervened in this world order to establish his rule.”⁶

Moreover, while exile in biblical texts is sometimes accompanied by the anticipation of a triumphant return, several texts also highlight its complexities. Upon returning from Babylon, the exiled Judeans faced significant challenges in rebuilding their society (Ezra-Nehemiah). The first chapter of Ezra details how conflict and obstacles arose in the rebuilding of the temple that delayed the process, including contact with those who remained in the land (Ezra 1:1–4). Other texts such as the book of Esther make no mention of homecoming, and centre around survival and integration of Jewish communities into the diaspora. Scholars such as Erich Gruen write that, “Diaspora Jews might find fulfilment and reward in their communities abroad, but they honoured Judaea as refuge for the formerly displaced and unsettled, and the prime legacy of all.”⁷ Gruen also discusses how the participation of diaspora communities in giving to the annual Jerusalem tithe in the Second Temple period does not necessarily indicate that they wanted to return.⁸ In fact, their participation in his view implies that diaspora communities saw return as unnecessary, and that the diaspora could endure indefinitely.

The desire for physical return to the homeland in some biblical texts has been overstated to the detriment of understanding how the texts engage exile as a site of transformation that is not entirely dependant on homecoming; a notable example being chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah.⁹ It has also been noted that the wilderness traditions became intricately linked to concepts such as exile in biblical texts.¹⁰ For example, Rebekah Van Sant argues that the wilderness motif, rather than emphasising homecoming as a panacea to the state of exile, emphasises the transformation of the people themselves. Furthermore, it addresses the divine’s disposition towards them, which has changed from one of punishment to one of kindness.

6 Knibb, “Exile,” 271–272.

7 Gruen, “Diaspora and Homeland,” 36.

8 Gruen, “Diaspora and Homeland,” 30–31.

9 Van Sant, *Poetics of Exile and Diaspora*.

10 Halvorson-Taylor, *Enduring Exile*, 70; Van Sant, *Poetics of Exile and Diaspora*.

The takeaway from this summary of scholarship on the motif of exile and return is that the paradigm of exile, with an implied desire for it to be completed or finished upon being *allowed* to return home, is not the only model that is present in biblical texts. There are texts, or parts of texts, that have more complex and open-ended perspectives towards exile and homecoming that challenge this paradigm.¹¹ Likewise, while contemporary media examples such as *Mass Effect* draw upon the biblical themes of exile and return, it is an interesting example in that it also highlights the complexities surrounding exile and homecoming that are also present in biblical traditions.

The Lord is my Shepherd: divine protection

The protagonist Commander Shepard is depicted in ways reminiscent of figures such as Moses, or Cyrus, who both mediate homecoming and function as redemptive figures albeit in different ways. Beginning with the name “Shepard”, this choice of name likely draws on pastoral imagery which is often connected to theme of the ingathering of the diaspora in the Hebrew Bible.¹² The shepherd motif in the Hebrew Bible commonly refers to a king or deity taking care of the people he is responsible for.¹³ It also occurs in other texts such as Psalm 77:21; 78:51–52; 80:2. In Isaiah 40:11, for example, a prominent text that addresses themes of exile and homecoming, the pastoral imagery refers to the ingathering of the diaspora:

כְּרֹעֶה עֶדְרוֹ יִרְעֶה בְּזְרְעוֹיִקְבֵּץ טְלָאִים וּבְחִיקוֹ יִשָּׂא עֲלוֹת יִנְהַל:

Like a shepherd He pastures His flock: He gathers the lambs in His arms.
And carries them in His bosom; gently He drives the mother sheep.

Cyrus of Persia in Second Isaiah (chs. 40–55 of Isaiah) is depicted as a messiah and mediator of the restoration of Judah through allowing the exiles to return. When Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon he changed the power structure and

11 Van Sant, *Poetics of Exile and Diaspora*.

12 The choice of the name no doubt draws on its prominence in the New Testament as well which is not the focus of this essay. For example, these usages such as John 10:1–21 draw on similar imagery in passages such as Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34:11–16 with the image of the ‘good shepherd’. For an interpretation of Shepard as a Christ-like figure, see Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*.

13 Barstad, *Way in The Wilderness*, 48–49.

policy towards the subjects of his empire. Subsequently, he authorized Judeans to return from Babylon to Judah and to rebuild the temple (cf. Ezra 1:2–4). Isaiah 45:1 states that the Lord refers to Cyrus as his messiah (לְמָשִׁיחַו). Later in verses two to three, the oracle describes how the Lord has called him by name, and will deliver treasures and cities into his hands.

Notably, Moses who leads the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness, and facilitates the giving of the law at Sinai, is perhaps the most notable example of a leader-figure who facilitates homecoming and functions as a prophetic divine mediator between God and the people. In Exodus 3:8 the Lord explains to Moses that he wants to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt to a land “flowing with milk and honey” (זָבַח חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ), and Moses is chosen by God to do this (Exodus 3:11–12). Subsequently he leads the Israelites as they wander through the wilderness in the books of Exodus and Numbers.

Bible and Mass Effect

After presenting the two prominent biblical themes discussed in this contribution, we will apply these themes to the story of *Mass Effect*.

Exile as Divine Punishment in Mass Effect

The Quarrians’ longing for return to Rannoch is reflected in the phrase *keelah se’lai* (“By the home world I hope to see one day”) that functions as a salutation in their language. The phrase *keelah si’yah* – “By the home world I hope to find one day” reflects another approach to the Quarrians’ existence as a nomadic people. (However, the second phrase occurs in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* which takes place in the same universe but approximately six-hundred years later, and follows a different plot than the *Mass Effect* trilogy). Like the Israelites who mourned their loss of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Quarrians lament their loss of Rannoch in ways that are directly noticeable in their language. This reflects their complicated existence in the Migrant Fleet, which is wrought with challenges and marginalization, as Quarrians are often met with disdain by many other peoples in the narrative world. Additionally, their bodies have not

adapted well to other atmospheres, meaning that Quarrians must wear protective suits to protect themselves from infection and disease wherever they go.

Their exile from Rannoch is also marked by religious upheaval, and societal shifts, much like the exiled Judeans. The religious practices of the Quarrians were also affected by the conflict, because the Geth destroyed the Quarrians’ ancestral “memory banks”, that is an AI interface designed to preserve the experiences and memories of their ancestors. This loss triggered a crisis within Quarrian religious practices, reinforcing the belief among some which their exile was indeed a form of divine punishment for creating AI was banned at the time. However, while some Quarrians in the game perceive their exile as a punishment, this view is not universal; creating the Geth was seen by some as a mistake, not as divine retribution. Overall, some do interpret their exile as punishment for their hubris in creating the Geth; a virtual intelligence workforce that eventually became sentient, leading to the conflict between the Quarrians and the Geth.

This perception of their exile as a punishment for their hubris in creating the Geth resonates with biblical themes of sin leading to displacement which was discussed earlier in this contribution. However, just as the Hebrew Bible does not offer a singular interpretation of exile, nor does *Mass Effect* portray a singular perspective concerning the Quarrians’ view of their displacement. Some see it as a historical mistake, while others frame it as an injustice inflicted upon them. Exile in biblical texts can be presented as a prerequisite for messianic redemption, but this does not exhaust its significance also as a state of hope and possibility.¹⁴

Similarly, some Quarrians find a sustainable, yet difficult, existence within their Migrant Fleet, adapting to life outside Rannoch. This contrast, exile as loss versus exile as possibility, echoes themes in *Mass Effect* where characters (like the Quarrians) must decide whether exile is a state to be resolved, or an opportunity for other ways of life. One way in which the player contributes to this will be discussed below, because it is possible for the player to broker peace and settlement for *both* the Quarrians and the Geth on Rannoch.

¹⁴ See also: Heschel, “An Exile of the Soul,” 15.

The Exodus and the Quarian ‘Migrant Fleet’

The Quarians’ displacement from Rannoch and subsequent existence as a nomadic species wandering the galaxies mirrors biblical narratives of displacement, particularly the wandering Israelites in the wilderness and the Babylonian exile. (Although set chronologically before the exile, it is widely accepted that the final versions of the narratives of the wilderness wanderings are final products of the exilic and/or post-exilic period). Just as the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years before reaching the Promised Land, the Quarians have wandered in space for centuries, surviving as a displaced people. The Exodus narrative (Exodus 12–15) provides another important biblical parallel. Their fleet, much like the Israelites’ mobile and wandering experience in the desert (e.g., Exodus 13:21), serves as both a symbol of resilience, and a testament to the continued divine presence in the form of the Tabernacle and the pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day that accompanies the people:

וַיְהִי הַלַּיְלָה לְפָנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעָמֹד עָנָן לְנִחֲתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ וְלַיְלָה בְּעָמֹד אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר לָהֶם לְלֶכֶת יוֹמָם וּלְלַיְלָה:

“The LORD went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night.

The liberation of the Exodus is not immediately followed by entry to the Promised Land, but first by the passage through the desert as detailed in the books of Exodus and Numbers. Exodus 15 and 16 tell of the Israelites struggling and grumbling against Moses in the wilderness for lack of food and water. That the desert is the place where the law is given to the people is highly significant. On the one hand, this takes shape in the Torah, such as the gift of the law on Mount Sinai in Exodus 20, on the other hand in the sometimes-difficult learning process of the people where food, water and healing are provided after a period of grumbling or discontent at the hardship of the wilderness journey. Throughout the wilderness wandering narratives there is often an alternation between rebellion and new learning results, related to God who, through his

appearances to the people, draws along with his people.

The conflict: Shepard as a Mediator

In the *Mass Effect* universe the player, as Commander Shepard, can affect intergalactic politics, and the conflict between the Geth and Quarians is a prominent aspect of the game’s plot, and the player’s choices throughout the trilogy effect the outcome. Broadly speaking there are three outcomes the player can achieve, one where there is peace between the Geth and Quarians and the Quarians are able to settle on Rannoch along with the Geth; the other outcome is that the Quarians retake Rannoch and annihilate the Geth, or the player aligns with the Geth over and against the Quarians thus preventing them from resettling in any fashion on Rannoch and annihilating the Quarians. The outcome where there is peace between the Quarians and Geth is achievable, but more difficult. Their exile and hope for a homeland or to return to Rannoch is a significant aspect of the *Mass Effect* trilogy that the player necessarily affects, and securing the loyalty of the Geth and Quarians increases the support that Commander Shepard requires to complete the trilogy’s ultimate mission.

The conflict between the Geth and Quarians is one way where Shepard’s role draws on biblical themes of leaders who functions as divine messengers, messiahs and leaders, leading the people to their destiny and to a homeland. In the third instalment, if the player has made certain choices, it is possible to facilitate peace between them. If peace is achieved, then the Quarians and Geth will reside on Rannoch together: in this same cutscene a nearby Geth asks if Admiral Raan has considered possible settlement sites for the Quarians on Rannoch:

Geth Prime:	You are welcome to return to Rannoch, Amidral Raan. With us. [...]
Admiral Raan:	We... the southern continent had excellent farmland, as I recall.

The version of the successful dialogue (if the player is able to choose “Paragon” options) is the following:

Shepard: The Geth don't want to fight you. If you can believe that for just one minute, this war will be over.

Shepard: You have a choice, please. Keelah se'lai.

The phrase *keelah se'lai*, ('By the home world I hope to see someday') is used in this cutscene and throughout the series as a greeting, and politely punctuates speech by the Quarians and others who speak with them. It gains significance in this particular context in Commander Shepard's plea to the Quarians not to attack the Geth. And it is also used by characters such as Legion (a Geth squad member) as their final words before sacrificing itself to give other Geth sentience, which is another condition of achieving peace between the Geth and Quarians. The way in which the phrase *keelah se'lai* functions is an indication that the function and purpose of homecoming can be, depending on the players' choices, more than simply retaking the homeland for the Quarians, leading to the annihilation of the Geth. Overall, in *Mass Effect*, the Quarians' return to Rannoch is not straightforward; reconciliation with the Geth and rebuilding their civilization remains a challenge. The game, like the Hebrew Bible, does not present homecoming as a simple resolution but rather as a nuanced, ongoing process where physical homecoming is not the only factor in consideration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, The *Mass Effect* series creatively engages with biblical themes of exile, homecoming, and redemption. The Quarians embody the struggles of a displaced people, drawing parallels with Israelite experiences in the Exodus and Babylonian exile. Meanwhile, Shepard's role as a leader who mediates return and reconciliation echoes figures like Moses and Cyrus. However, both the game and biblical texts challenge the notion of a simple return, instead presenting exile and homecoming as ongoing, dynamic processes. Modern engagements with the concept of exile likely inform *Mass Effect*'s characterisation of the Quarians as a nomadic people living in diaspora with multiple perspectives and relationships towards their home world. Similar to how the Quarians long for Rannoch yet define themselves by their journey.

Exile is a place of identity formation, and homecoming is not necessarily a zero-sum-game or the only goal; homecoming can take different shapes as a result of the player's actions (e.g., how the player can achieve peace between both the Geth and Quarians). In *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, we also find the phrase *keelah si'yah* ('By the home world I hope to find one day') which further indicates that within the narrative universe of *Mass Effect* that different responses to displacement can be held in productive tension with one another.¹⁵ Overall, *Mass Effect*'s portrayal of the Quarians reflects a complex relationship between exile, diaspora and homecoming that is also evident in the Hebrew Bible, and how the themes of exile and homecoming continue to resonate in Judaism and Christianity.

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RELIGION AND THE BIBLE IN ‘CYBERPUNK 2077’

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Early cyberpunk works that emerged in the 1980s were not predominantly concerned with investigating the role of religion in their dystopic societies. One cyberpunk scholar has noted that ‘the rise of science (or at least fictional pseudo-science) in these texts assumes a default atheist position, reflecting a binary tension between science and religion.’¹ However, the release of the videogame *Cyberpunk 2077* by CD Projekt RED in 2020 signifies a step change in how media of the cyberpunk genre engage with the role of religion in society.² While the game was in development, CD Projekt RED made a statement expressing that as the world of the game was to be based on the real world, religions would be featured in the game due to their importance in society.³ Indeed, there is a preponderance of religious themes and motifs in the game. Alongside different varieties of Christianity the player is also exposed to Japanese Shinto religion, Buddhism, esotericism, and some new religious movements unique to the *Cy-*

¹ Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women*, 118.

² This contribution deals with only the base game and not the expansion material from *Phantom Liberty*.

³ Kim, “Here’s What CD Projekt Red Really Said About Religion in *Cyberpunk 2077*” [accessed 18 December 2023].

berpunk 2077 world. Interactions with these religions and biblical references in the game allow the player to consider the most common themes of the cyberpunk genre from positionalities that move away from the default atheist position that was previously so prevalent. In fact, given that religions are often concerned with issues intersecting with our body and our ‘soul’ or consciousness, it is fitting to use religious ideas to question how new technologies will affect the human experience. This contribution will begin with an overview of the cyberpunk genre and significant contextual details of this video game. The second section will focus on how technologically enhanced bodies are viewed by two opposing worldviews as either furthering or limiting human experience and flourishing. The third section will address how in-game groups view the advancement of virtual space and virtual existence as another means for possible alternatives to embodied life and eternal life. Lastly, this contribution will evaluate how biblical texts and themes are employed in *Cyberpunk 2077* to demonstrate the ambiguous role western Christianity and its textual traditions have, and may continue to have, in an increasingly technologized world.

Cyberpunk

The four themes of cyberpunk put forward by Frances Bonner are ‘computers, corporations, crime, and corporeality.’⁴ The four Cs are prevalent in Night City, the fictional Californian city in which the narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077* takes place. Megacorporations, or megacorps, have extended their total dominance such that governments have virtually no practical power or authority. The megacorps have created a world of hyper-capitalism, promulgating a narrative that prioritises consumption and pleasure seeking as the route to happiness rather than prohibiting anything in particular. They also utilise their own military forces and corrupt business practices in order to maintain their hegemony over politics, the entertainment industry, food, and, most significantly, cybernetic implants. Exorbitant disparity is thus evident throughout Night City in aspects of culture such as health care and insurance, crippling debt from purchasing cybernetic implants in order to perform jobs, and the exploitative use

of over-worked employees.⁵ The phenomenon of cybernetic enhancements intersects with the cyberpunk theme of corporeality; the challenge of understanding our identities in a context where bodies can be augmented and improved with a multitude of different physiological ‘upgrades’. The services on offer from the many ‘ripperdocs’ of Night City include: organ replacements that enhance reaction and healing times; gorilla arms; artificial eyes that enhance vision and allow the user to scan objects and humans; reinforced tendons to enable ‘double-jumping’; implanted cyberdecks to facilitate the hacking of electronics and other people’s cyberdecks; not to mention aesthetic body modifications such as skin dying and spine stretching. This cybernetic technology is often branded with the corp’s name: Arasaka, Kiroshi, Militech, etc. and most people of Night City have some kind of technological enhancement. The theme of corporeality intersects with the theme of computers here in that the ability to enter cyberspace, or in *Cyberpunk 2077*, ‘the Net’ allows for the escape from the physical body. Lastly, crime is prevalent in *Cyberpunk 2077* both in terms of the corruption of the megacorporations, but also in the sense that with little effective law enforcement, several violent gangs have formed, waging their own turf wars on the streets of Night City. Residents are lawfully allowed to carry firearms and melee weapons, thus violent crime is rife.

Cyberpunk 2077 is a first person role playing game; the player controls an avatar named V who is completely designed by the player. The player can choose from many different body shapes, genitals, a feminine or masculine voice, and modify many facial features such as their nose, mouth and eye shapes, eye colour, and chin. Additionally, jewellery, tattoos, nail varnish and other bodily features can be customised to an incredible degree of detail. Such autonomy over the design of a player’s avatar contributes to higher levels of immersion in the world of the game.⁶ V is a mercenary for hire who during a botched heist ends up with a biochip in their head that they have stolen from the megacorp Arasaka. The biochip is a prototype of a commodity Arasaka is producing, the ‘Secure your Soul’ programme, which allows people to upload their consciousness to a biochip so that loved ones may continue to have them in their lives. In fact, the first time the player hears about this product is at the very start of the game;

⁴ Bonner, “Separate Development,” 191.

⁵ Deshbandhu, “Ludic Prognostication,” 18–19.

⁶ Ching-I Teng, “Customization,” Birk, Atkins, Bowey, and Mandryk, “Fostering Intrinsic Motivation.” On the identification of the player with the avatar see: Rehak, “Playing at Being.”

the player sees a late night chat show interview between a Christian leader, Reverend Colver, and an Arasaka employee from their PR department. The latter, named Karina Lee, characterises the service as providing immortality for its users, while the Reverend views this as another form of corporate corruption and greed. The late night show host, Ziggy, retorts that the church has also had a history of making money from people by promising them ‘life after death’ and charging funeral fees. The game thus initiates an exploration about the effects of technology on our understandings of life and death. With the increasing sophistication of technology the need for religious understandings about life after death, souls, and grief are presented as becoming rapidly obsolete. Instead, capitalistic megacorporations are able to step in and monetise this aspect of the human experience. The player, as they direct and control their avatar V through the game, is thus led to reflect on the potential benefits or pitfalls of this technological progression. Cyberpunk works, and science fiction more broadly, have typically offered commentary and critique of the current *Zeitgeist*, they are reflective of key concerns and anxieties being felt in the contemporary moment.⁷ In a time of polarised political and religious identities, especially in the United States of America, a cyberpunk video game featuring various religions and sacred texts will offer an intriguing analysis of the current state of play.

The Story Arc

The overarching story arc of the game probes the traditional cyberpunk agenda of what it means to be human in a world where body parts can be completely replaced with cybernetics, and the mind can be uploaded to the Net to be later uploaded to a different body, or simply exist without a body at all. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, the stolen prototype, known as the Relic, contains the consciousness, or engram, of Johnny Silverhand. Silverhand was an infamous terrorist-rockstar who successfully blew up Arasaka headquarters fifty years earlier, but was captured and had his consciousness copied to the Relic prior to his death. This engram on the Relic biochip is gradually taking over V’s own consciousness, and Silverhand, voiced and depicted by Keanu Reeves, ‘haunts’ V’s mind as they try to find a removal method. However, the engram, as it tries to write Silverhand’s

⁷ Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women*, 10–11.

consciousness over the mind and body of V, is damaging V to such an extent that they are told they will die if the Relic is removed. In what way do these transhumanist enhancements affect the human experience and religious understandings of afterlife, souls and sacred texts? Several side quests involving religious groups provide opportunities for the player to reflect on this pertinent question. This video game, as a socio-cultural artefact which is played and experienced narratively, can be interpreted as a means to probe what lay ahead in the technologically-enhanced future of humanity.⁸

Cybernetic Bodies: Two Opposing In-game Perspectives

One of the gangs of Night City is called Maelstrom. They are recognisable by their extreme use of cybernetics, often appearing more machine than human. They modify their faces and bodies to be intentionally intimidating, and have ‘fetishized’ cybernetics by using this hardware in initiation rites and forms of torture.⁹ Many gang members have underlying cyberpsychosis – a dissociative disorder caused by the overloading of cyberware augmentations – leading to extreme violence and personality fragmentation. The player learns about the risks of cyberpsychosis when visiting some ripperdocs in the game, and V is also hired to neutralise cyberpsychos in the game in order to stop them from posing a risk to the general public. Maelstrom deems those with no or little cyberware to be weak and inferior. They clearly view the human body as a vulnerability and use extreme transhumanism to escape the limitations of human flesh, a trope found in the wider cyberpunk genre.¹⁰

Maelstrom is also fascinated by the occult which intersects with their obsession towards the mysteries of the Net. In one quest called ‘Cyberpsycho

⁸ Deshbandhu, ‘Ludic Prognostication’, 3.

⁹ ‘Fetishized’ here is used as a term in the game in relation to this group, presumably because they believe their mechanical body parts not only augment their physical bodies but also augment spiritual experiences too. They believe that using cybernetic enhancements will provide access to beings in cyberspace they wish to worship. In the history of the study of religion, the term ‘fetish’ has related to a material object believe to be imbued with supernatural power, however this is wrapped up with a history of colonialism and racial stereotyping and as such may be better understood as constructs which provide protection for Euroamerican autonomy and dominance. Jay Geller summarises that the term fetish ‘has been employed to negotiate problematic social relationships, cultural contacts, and epistemological quandaries that arise when human desire, material objects, and affixed value converge.’ See: Geller, ‘Fetish/Fetishism/Fetishization,’ 20.

¹⁰ Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women*, 63.

Sighting: Bloody Ritual', V must kill or non-lethally incapacitate a Maelstrom member called Zaria Hughes. Zaria has undergone a ritual which appears to combine sacrificial elements with cyberware in order to make contact with rogue AIs in cyberspace. The ritual process is not clear but it appears to have been unsuccessful and triggered an acute cyberpsychosis episode in Zaria, leading her to kill the gang members present. A readable data shard found on Zaria's body reads:

The boys have prepared everything and found me a lamb. Blood will course through the fibreoptics, swirling and blending with the digital, opening the gates of the abyss. Death within arm's reach, the metallic taste of his scythe on my tongue. I will tug at the tangled cables of Fate. A hard reset, a blue screen, a brain reformatted ... I'm ready. Luck be with me.

When you first approach the area a bleeding out gang member says 'Lilith has concealed the tenth circle from the ancestors' eyes.' Lilith is a figure from Jewish folklore,¹¹ being the first, rejected, wife of Adam and later evolved into a demonised entity which has seeped into wider cultural mythology. The references to 'a lamb', blood, and Lilith in this cybernetically enhanced Maelstrom ritual speaks to the possible merging of ritual and technology, as opposed to an assumed incompatibility. In this world, transhumanism may allow for the enhancement of the human body, but it may also provide new points of access to the spiritual.

Another quest that V takes on is called 'Losing my Religion'. A Buddhist bhikku, or monk, requests that V rescues his brother, also a bhikku, as he has been captured by Maelstrom gang members and forcibly implanted with cybernetic body parts. In *Cyberpunk 2077* none of the Buddhist monks V encounters have any cyberware. The reason for this is provided on another data shard which explains that as bhikkus must reject all possessions aside from their robe, an umbrella, and an alms bowl they also reject any implants. It is not clear whether a corporation-produced cyberarm would be considered part of the bhikku's body or a possession due to the fact that it has been purchased, if the latter then it would be a barrier on their path to 'enlightenment'. This perspective emphasises the hy-

per-capitalism of Night City, in that the megacorporations have made it possible for the body to be constructed from commodified parts. Bodies are no longer just bodies, but are now means for generating profit via the production and consumption of cybernetic organs, limbs and optical replacements. The bhikku avoids participation in this dynamic of consumerism and ownership; thus the imposition of cyberware on the captured monk is extremely perturbing for him and his brother. From this Buddhist perspective then, cyberware is anathema to their human experience because it is a barrier to their spiritual transcendence.

Cyberspace and other Digital Realities

In addition to the notion of technology transcending what it is to be human via cybernetic implants, another route cyberpunk media often explore is freedom from a physical body by existing only as a 'mind' in cyberspace itself. This engages with the Cartesian body/mind binary and the question of which contributes most potently to our sense of self. However, no characters in *Cyberpunk 2077* ever explicitly worry that the bodiless version of themselves in cyberspace might not really be them, instead for some groups being able to traverse the Net at will is to escape death completely. In a questline involving a Haitian gang known as the Voodoo Boys a data shard called 'The Consciousness Curse' is found expressing this anxiety around death:

Man dies the way he was born: soft, weak and helpless. Death, the one certainty in this universe of chaos, can be both a tragic end and a release from suffering. It can come as an unexpected twist, or as a beautiful, crowning counterpart to a life well lived. The curse we face as humanity, the only living beings in constant awareness of death, is our inordinate focus on the fact. How much happier is the life of the gazelle that escapes the cheetah's clutches, thinking that it evaded death once and for all, than the poor soul living out his days knowing each step inches him close to the void!

The ability to know that your consciousness will live on is, for some groups in Night City, to 'evade death once and for all'. The Voodoo Boys want to make contact with a rogue AI who exists in the Old Net, beyond the Blackwall, a pro-

¹¹ The Alphabet of Ben Sira 78. See: Scholem and Heschel, "Lilith."

protective barrier to keep the Net safe from the destructive rogue AIs which were released during the huge 'Datakrash' in the early 2020s. A virus destroyed many corporations' datafortresses, and military grade AIs were released as a result, allowing them to mutate and evolve. The Blackwall was created by Netwatch to keep them away from the new Net. The AI known as Alt Cunningham is the most powerful of these. She is an AI version of a real human from before the attack on Arasaka Tower and was the original creator of the technology which was developed into Soullkiller. Due to her advanced netrunning (hacking) skills she developed the method to transfer and contain human and AI intelligence, allowing for the complete transfer of a human mind to the Net. Arasaka kidnapped Alt and stole this technology to create and commercialise the Soullkiller programme. Alt was the first victim of Soullkiller, her body was killed when her mind was copied and then imprisoned in Arasaka's datafortress, Mikoshi. During the attack on Arasaka tower another netrunner was able to disperse Alt onto the Net where she established a digital haven for other victims of the Soullkiller technology. The Voodoo Boys believe that the Blackwall is going to fail soon, and when it does they want to be accepted on the Net by Alt and the other rogue AIs so that they will not be harmed by them. The Voodoo Boys are the gang which first wanted to steal the Relic from Arasaka in order to make contact with Alt. V thus is made to travel with the Voodoo Boys beyond the Blackwall to converse with Alt Cunningham.

In Cyberspace, Alt appears as a towering red goddess, with large breasts and flowing hair; she is both feared and loved and is known to be the most powerful AI. It does appear to be the case that these AI entities have assumed the role of deities for some groups in Night City. When in the local church of the Voodoo Boys you can find a data shard called 'Earth Reborn':

Our world is a world of people. Mankind has effectively eradicated any supernatural beings: mythical beings, folkloric creatures, gods - even the monotheistic God. Mankind has even given up hope of contact with extraterrestrial civilizations, though little green men have been among us for some time already, paying us visits in their flying saucers. Only Man remains. And Man looked around and realized he was alone. In his loneliness, Man felt the emptiness within him and started to repopulate it with beings other than

himself. That is how artificial intelligence was created - from simple, deterministic robots obedient to their human masters, to becoming more intelligent and independent than Man could ever conceive. The unpredictability and power of artificial intelligence was greeted by Man with apprehension, but also with joy. Finally! Spirits and elemental forces have once again returned to our world! We could catalogue them - construct a hierarchy. We could fence them off behind the Blackwall and draw a new line between what is natural and supernatural - here is the Earth and here is the sky. How painful Man's solitude must have been if he had to create a palpable, technological mythology and surrender to the demons of his own creation!

This text is an intriguing recycling of the creation story of Genesis 2, but here humanity is the creator of the AIs. The creations become dangerous and must be kept at bay - not unlike the *Chaoskampf* motif found in wider ancient southwest Asian mythology.¹² Intriguingly, the leader of the Voodoo Boys, Maman Brigitte, tells V that the Haitians left their gods in Haiti, but now they are more powerful than ever. Their netrunning skills have allowed them to replace their dependence on spiritual entities with the mysterious digital entities that reside in cyberspace, where they too wish to follow. The Voodoo Boys call their private region of the Net 'Reza Agwe', meaning something like 'network of loa'. The loa are the spirits in Haitian voodoo which mediate between humans and God. So despite Maman Brigitte's insistence that they have left their gods in Haiti it does not seem that they have entirely renounced a belief in higher beings. Now, it is the dangerous AIs which humans have created that are akin to deities for the Haitians; they too need appeasing in order to garner their protection and favour.

It is intriguing that the data fortress which houses the constructs from the 'Secure Your Soul' programme is called Mikoshi. A mikoshi is a portable shrine in Shinto religion, used to transport deities from one shrine to another during festivals. In one of the game's endings, if the player decides to attack Arasaka headquarters, V discovers that Saburo Arasaka has also had his consciousness transferred to Mikoshi using the Soullkiller technology. The patriarch of the

¹² The idea of 'Chaoskampf' can also be found in other ancient cultures and is present in biblical texts as well, such as Job 40-41; Ps 74:14; 104:26; see: Uehlinger, "Leviathan."

Arasaka family and corporation has given himself immortality and enshrined himself in Mikoshi to continue controlling the corporation through his children. He too appears as an enormous red god, his holographic image towering over his domain and descendants. Thus, both the Voodoo Boys and Saburo Arasaka clearly perceive this technology of existing in a bodiless form in cyberspace as a means to transcend the human limitation of the mortal body. Merging the idea of becoming divine with the idea of becoming a digital entity has allowed for this potentially eternal extension of life. The game itself does not appear to agree, however, as Alt Cunningham confirms that while she did not name the program Soullkiller, it does exactly what it promises. She says that when human consciousness is copied using the programme, the soul of that person will cease to exist.

Ultimately then, the game suggests that the true self, the part of our identity we might call a soul, cannot be copied, and possibly requires a body for its existence. The game also posits the idea that corporations will not only exploit the use of cybernetic bodies so that consumerism will extend into the purchasing of our own body parts, but corporations will also attempt to obtain the 'souls' of those rich enough to afford the Secure your Soul service. The wealthy will pay to secure their immortality, but this copy of a person's consciousness officially becomes the property of the corporation. Furthermore, the technology is actually aiming to make engrams of highly influential and profitable individuals such as artists, politicians and religious leaders. The tentacles of capitalism, in this dystopic video game, exceed our current experience of late-stage capitalism and consumerism, encroaching into our bodies and our souls.

Another type of virtual space that intersects with religious practices in the game is the braindance. A braindance is a type of virtual reality entered by using a headset which allows the 'audience' to experience all the sensations and emotions of the actors who recorded the braindance. In Night City these are commercially successful for the film industry, where any adrenaline packed adventure will offer a full body experience for 'viewers'. Violent braindances, and the use of braindances as an alternative to strip clubs, are also predominantly featured in the game. However, there is one quest line in which V encounters a 'Zen Master', another Bhuddist Bhikku, who takes V on four guided meditations

using a braindance headset. The Zen Master tells V that in the city they are cut off from nature and that in order to restore equilibrium with themselves and gain self-fulfilment they must engage in meditation. Each meditative braindance accords with the four natural elements of earth, fire, water and air; the lush scenery and atmospheric soundscape of each braindance immerses V. What is most intriguing about these four meditation quests is that the player also effectively meditates. While the player is controlling their avatar V they must also participate in the guided meditation, it cannot be skipped or sped up. This type of practice within a game is perhaps what videogame theorist Jason Anthony would categorise as a digital praxic game within the typology of religious videogames that he develops.¹³ This is because the player engages in the practice of meditation via the game. Unless the player shuts off the game or puts down the controller and walks out of the room the player observes the beautiful scene of nature, and follows the guided words of the Zen Master. In this sense then it is not just V, but also the player, who participates in a potential spiritual practice that may serve to enhance the human experience. Intriguingly, meditation is also lauded in other parts of the game. An anti-corporation group called The Bartmoss Collective occasionally sends messages to V's phone, one of which reads 'The best weapon against capitalism is uninterrupted meditation'. Another character V meets, who is a braindance producer herself, proclaims that spirituality can only ever be personal and that she spends her spare time meditating. In this way, the use of meditation, possibly enhanced by braindance technology, is pitched as an escape from the hyper-capitalism of the cyberpunk city, perhaps a means of grasping for some kind of humanity amidst the cybernetic implants and pursuit for digital immortality.

Christianity and the Bible

Christianity is presented in a variety of forms in *Cyberpunk 2077*. One case is a fixer for whom V does a series of different violent jobs, Sebastian 'Padre' Ibarra, a former Catholic priest. He often frames the jobs in terms of doing God's justice, or requiring somebody to receive judgement. For example, in a gig named 'An Eye for an Eye' Padre claims that the legal punishment for a woman who

¹³ Anthony, "Dreidels to Dante's Inferno," 37.

knocked over a girl with her car was not ‘justice’ and instead wants V to pull the trigger. He quotes an abridged form of Exodus 21:23–25: ‘Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, hand for a hand, wound for a wound.’ Another gig title quotes from Job 1:21, ‘The Lord Giveth and Taketh Away’. Sometimes Padre modifies and blends together different biblical references to suit his needs, such as this combination of Qohelet 3:1–8, Matthew 5:39 and Jeremiah 48:10: ‘There’s a time for forgiveness and a time for revenge. There’s a time for turning the other cheek and a time for crushing your enemies like the roaches they are. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “Cursed is he who keeps his sword from bloodshed!”’ He also makes use of Patristic authorities, telling V: ‘Saint Augustine once wrote: When one has a healthy sense of smell, he will immediately recognize the stench of sin.’¹⁴ The game therefore appears to be using this Catholic fixer as a way of demonstrating how violence and bloodshed might be legitimated by appealing to God or biblical texts.

A similar approach seems to be being taken in the naming of an iconic assault rifle. The weapon is called *Psalm 11:6*, this biblical passage reads ‘On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.’ The rifle is modified to set aflame any enemies shot with it. In these respects then, the biblical texts selected for use are not creating the most generous of presentations and instead appear to be critical of their extant violence.

The game also takes the stereotypical receptions of some biblical tropes and perpetuates them, such as the idea of Eve as a sexually promiscuous woman.¹⁵ One of the gigs V may complete is to steal the recordings of a councilwoman named Eva Cole from her yacht where she has been having sex parties. The dialogue from the fixer reads:

So there’s this Councilwoman, Eva Cole. By day, she’s a living nightmare for greedy corpos, pointin’ the finger on abuse, digging up problematic witness, dishin’ out fees and penalties and whatever. And by night - she fucks.

¹⁴ This paraphrased quote from Saint Augustine is from *Explanations of the Psalms (Enarrationes in Psalmos)* in relation to Ps. 38:5. The original quotation is closer to the following: ‘Let a man but have his soul’s sense of smelling sound, he perceives how foully sins stink.’

¹⁵ On Eve’s receptions as temptress and seductress see: Morse, *Encountering Eve’s Afterlives*, 11–62; Blyth and Colgan, “Sex, Lies, and Disobedience,” and many other helpful chapters in that volume; Edwards, *Admen and Eve*; Colette, “Eroticizing Eve.”

Like a fuckin’ cat in heat, with whoever lands on the deck of her yacht docked down at the marina...I wouldn’t sit on any of the furniture if I was you.

The inaccurate reputation of the biblical Eve as a femme fatale or seductress is here replicated uncritically in the game. While the above examples of biblically endorsed violence appear to be aware of the ways in which such texts can be used to legitimate violence, this recycling of Eve’s sexual persona is seemingly oblivious to the harm such stereotypes have had on women. By completing the quest, the Eve character in the game is effectively punished for having an adventurous sex life, despite the fact that she has tried to prevent harm and abuse as part of her career in a corrupt city.

Joshua Stephenson and the Gospel of Luke

The most robust use of biblical material in *Cyberpunk 2077* comes from the New Testament, specifically the Gospel of Luke. V is given a job by a fixer to help a man, Bill Jablonsky, kill his wife’s murderer, Joshua Stephenson, who is being transported from prison by police through the city. In this attempt, the police usually end up killing Jablonsky, but Joshua Stephenson stops any harm from coming to V and asks V to join him in the police car. When you tell Stephenson that you were working with Bill Jablonsky, who is now dead, he lifts up his hands and says ‘Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom’ (Psalm 90:12). At this point Johnny Silverhand appears to V and encourages them to find out what Joshua wants. During the car journey, Joshua tells V that twelve years prior he was put in prison for armed robbery and other sins such as murdering several people in cold blood. In order to make up for what he did he wants to make amends to the families of those he murdered and lead other people away from similar paths of darkness. He asks V to spend the rest of the day with him, once V accepts this request the ‘Sinnerman’ quest is completed and a new quest begins called ‘There is a Light that Never Goes Out.’ The car then drops V and Joshua at the house of a family; the family of one of Joshua’s murdered victims.

Once inside the house you see a shrine to the murdered family member, on

which is a Bible. This is the only physical book you see in the game as all other texts are on chips that are inserted into the head. There are also candles, photos, and Orthodox style crosses decorating the home. In this home, the player can also find a data shard called ‘The Coptic Bible’, but the shard contains extracts from the Book of Enoch regarding the angels who conceived children with human women. This is intriguing as Coptic Orthodoxy does not hold the Book of Enoch to be canonical, whereas Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity does.¹⁶ We do not know whether this element was an intentional feature for the developers of *Cyberpunk 2077*, but it is clearly part of the game-internal universe. The last line of the datashard is ‘Then the earth laid accusation against the lawless ones.’ Perhaps this is the connection to Joshua Stephenson; a once lawless man who committed multiple violent crimes now seeks forgiveness from family members of one of his victims.

V meets the sister of the man Joshua killed, Zuleikha. She pours the three of them glasses of water and says ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.’ V discovers that Zuleikha wrote letters to Joshua while he was in prison and they became united through the power of forgiveness. Joshua converted to Christianity and found redemption, while Zuleikha believes that God brought Joshua to her as another brother. However, they are having a dispute. Joshua wants to be crucified like Jesus and have it recorded as a braindance; Zuleikha views this as suicide. It is at this point that Joshua’s name becomes significant; Joshua is the anglicised version of the name Jesus while the last name, Stephenson, likely refers to Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr who is stoned to death for his faith in Acts 6:54–60. Joshua says that he wants to bear witness to love’s existence so that all lost souls on earth can understand. Zuleikha refers to the studio and megacorporation funding them as ‘bloodsuckers’, while Joshua believes that as he was facing the electric chair anyway, his death will become more than just ‘state-sanctioned murder’. He believes that if unconditional love exists then so must God and that the world needs reminding of God’s divine presence. Joshua asks V if they, as a paid killer, has known love or knows what love is. The question is left unanswered, perhaps hanging for the player to contemplate.

¹⁶ The text of 1 Enoch, also called the Ethiopian Enoch book, has been received in Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Ge’ez. For further information and commentary see: Nickelsburg, 1 *Enoch*; Ego, “Henoch / Henochliteratur” [accessed 17 January 2024].

Once back in the car, the player may continue to question Joshua’s motives in recording his own crucifixion. In the car you are accompanied by a braindance producer called Rachel. In a private conversation after Joshua has left the car to go to a restaurant, Rachel reveals to V that she thinks Joshua is a ‘nutcase’ but wants him to record the braindance because he authentically believes what he says about God and love, making him the perfect braindance actor. She says that if the braindance goes to plan, Stephenson could be ‘a fat, old, fucking gold vein for our studio’. Rachel becomes worried that V’s questions will make him doubt his convictions, jeopardising the studio’s investment, so she tries to bribe V to walk away. The player can choose to accept the bribe, at which point the quest ends and Joshua makes the braindance of the crucifixion without any further involvement from V. If the bribe is not accepted then V goes to join Joshua and Rachel in the restaurant, they are sat centrally at a long table, emulating Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* – securing this cyberpunk themed retelling of Jesus’s passion in the mind of the player.

Over the course of Joshua Stephenson’s last meal, further details are revealed to V about the braindance and Joshua’s faith. The braindance studio has a megacorporation as its majority stakeholder and the title of the braindance is going to be “The Passion.” The writers originally wanted to use the Gospel of John as the proof text for the recording, but Joshua forced them to use the Gospel according to Luke instead. He asserts that John’s version is crude and over the top, while Luke’s Gospel speaks more to his sensibility; Luke’s Jesus is prepared for what awaits him and Joshua wants to the world to understand and feel that sense of preparation. After Joshua and Rachel leave, Johnny Silverhand appears and, due to his loathing for the corrupt megacorporations, tells V that this braindance is corporate exploitation. The corps will carry on growing rich off ‘his type’ and the ‘masses will live on with their pipe dreams’. One of the dialogue options the player is given is to ask Johnny if he believes God exists. Johnny does not really answer the question but it leads to a debate about whether an engram can be saved. V makes the point that they died and rose from the dead due to the Relic, to which Johnny responds by asking ‘So, what was that? A miracle? What’s it make you – a messiah, a phoenix or a factory-restored, early model Archer? ...Tell you exactly what brought you back – a clever bit of corpo tech. If there’s a true messiah among us, I’ll tell you who

it is – Saburo Arasaka.’ From this perspective then, the game is suggesting to the player that technology such as the Relic may well be achieving similar outcomes to messianic figures like Jesus, or mythological creatures like the phoenix. Megacorporations and the products they sell are providing people with the possibility of resurrection, according to Silverhand. Silverhand and V then debate whether the engram on the Relic is the soul of Silverhand, whether he will go to digiheaven, or whether Johnny Silverhand is really dead. The answers to these questions are not answered here but they hang over the game, provoking the player, until the meeting with Alt Cunningham occurs which was discussed above.

Sometime later Rachel rings V saying Joshua is having a breakdown and is refusing to go through with the crucifixion recording. When V goes to the studio to speak to Joshua he says that he wants V by his side when his soul departs this world, but is more determined than ever to go through with the recording of the crucifixion. Around his waist Joshua appears to be wearing his orange prisoner’s jumpsuit fashioned into the stereotypical garment Jesus is often depicted wearing on the cross. At this point, the player can choose from four dialogue options, two of which encourage and support Joshua in his decision, and two which try to discourage him. Regardless of which choice the player makes Joshua will still make the crucifixion recording, there is no way for the player to change the narrative of this particular quest to prevent Joshua from crucifying himself.

Regardless of the dialogue option chosen, Joshua then asks V to pray with him. This scene is an allusion to Luke 22:40–46: Jesus asks his intimate disciples to pray and when they appear not to do so, Jesus does nevertheless. Again, the player is given a choice of whether to pray at all. If the player chooses not to pray then Joshua prays on his own, or there is the option for V to clasp hands and be with Joshua while he prays to the Holy Spirit. However, if the player says they will pray with Joshua the following options are available: The Lord’s Prayer,¹⁷ a fragment of the Amidah, a hymn from the Rigveda, or to ‘pray in your own way’. The latter option is notably shorter than the three other prayer

options but asks the Lord to use divine wisdom and guidance to bestow good fortune on Joshua and V.

After the praying has finished, Joshua then asks V to be the one to wield the nail and hammer during his crucifixion. The player may choose to accept, or to stay but not be the one to hammer the nails, or to refuse to stay for the crucifixion at all. Once again, there is no way to prevent Joshua from being crucified even if you refuse to hammer in the nails. When V stays to watch you witness another person approach Joshua with a hammer, he nails Joshua’s wrists to the cross, Joshua screams in agony, and he says ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’, quoting from Luke 23:34. A button is then pressed to raise the cross upright, at which point Joshua calls out ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43). Johnny Silverhand’s engram then appears and stands at Joshua’s feet, head bowed. Joshua continues quoting from Luke: ‘Father, Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit’ (Luke 23:46). Joshua then dies.

This use of Luke is even more pronounced if the player selects the option to be the one to hammer in the nails, as the player is required to participate in the spoken dialogue of the recording. The player must pick up the hammer and nails; a futuristic looking hammer but long, square, Roman-style nails. As V walks to the cross on which Joshua is laying, Johnny Silverhand’s engram appears and also starts quoting from Luke: ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and save us!’ (Luke 23:39), the words of one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus. The player then hammers the first nail into Joshua’s wrist. For each of the three nails the hammer descends three times. Every hammer-strike is initiated by the player pressing a button and thus the player actively participates in the crucifixion rather than watching the process passively. As Joshua screams in pain, V recites the words of the other criminal: ‘Do you not fear God? You stand condemned under the same sentence’ (v. 40). As the player hammers the second nail, Joshua recites the line from Luke 23:34. This is then followed by hammering the third nail into Joshua’s feet as V reads aloud ‘We are punished justly, for we receive what our deeds deserve. But this man has done no wrong. Remember me when you come into your kingdom’ (vs.41–42). V then presses the button which raises the cross and Joshua says the same final line.

¹⁷ Although *Cyberpunk 2077* makes explicitly use of the Gospel of Luke, the Lord’s prayer is given in the Matthean (Matt. 6:9–13), not in the Lukan version (Lk. 11:2–4).

V and Johnny Silverhand stand in for the two criminals in Luke's Passion, as criminals and rebels against the capitalist system of Night City this appears significant. They are the exact audience Joshua wants to reach, perhaps emulating the same kind of audience Luke's Gospel was also aiming to touch.¹⁸ Joshua says, while at Zuleika's house, that the people he wants to have know God's love are 'the millions jacked into their feeds like livestock, the children growing up on gang-infested streets...the joytoys [sex workers] on Jig-Jig Street, coked-out corpos in their offices, and murderers who stalk the streets.' Perhaps the reason why Joshua Stephenson says Luke's Gospel speaks more to his worldview is because of the focus on the poor that this Gospel exhibits. For example, in Luke 4:18–19 Jesus announces at the start of his ministry the God has anointed him to preach the good news to the poor and to reclaim freedom for the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. In the Magnificat attention is paid to the poor: 'he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away' (Luke 1:53). In Jesus' parable of the banquet, Jesus instructs that the poor should be invited (Luke 14:13). Other stories, such as the 'sinful' woman who washes Jesus' feet, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, also portray Jesus as particularly concerned for the poor and marginalised of society.¹⁹

When Rachel later contacts V to send over the compensation she will say that the release of the braindance has been a success; the megacorporation has made even more money, and therefore she gives V a small bonus for participating in the crucifixion. The implication is that by V hammering in the nails and reciting the Gospel of Luke with Joshua the braindance was enhanced due to the heightening of Joshua's religious zeal. Despite the reported success of the braindance, Night City does not become a tangibly changed place like the one Joshua imagined, there is no evidence that anybody V interacts with has suddenly become aware of God's love. The technology of cyberpunk, these fully immersive physiological 'films', are not ultimately portrayed to be a means for religious evangelisation and conversion experiences. Instead, the braindance, in its sensationalism, generates a lot of profit, Joshua's religion is a spectacle but it does not transform people's spirituality or morality. In this sense then, the game does not depict or envisage a reality where Christianity enhances the

human experience in the midst of vast technological enhancements, and nor does technology enhance the experience of Christianity. Instead, it appears only to continue as it ever has, as an assistant to the capitalist agenda.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this quest has brought about a large quantity of player reaction online, with many players finding it disturbing, disgusting, and wrong.²⁰ Part of the outrage is levelled at the 'sick corpo fucks using the whole situation to make money.'²¹ It appears that one of the effects of this quest on a player is to realise how far the corporations will allow their exploitation to go for the sake of profit. The lack of the ability to prevent Joshua from going ahead with the crucifixion demonstrates that the game developers wanted the ending to be inevitable in order to portray the corporations in a negative light, with no opportunity for a get out.²² If a player accepts the bribe from Rachel then the player makes the choice to allow Joshua to go through with the crucifixion and gains a monetary reward. If a player decides not to accept the bribe then the crucifixion also goes ahead, the studio and megacorporation profit, and the player is still rewarded. Either way, the corporation is portrayed as actively pursuing human sacrifice in the name of capital, and the player has either facilitated, or passively tolerated, the crucifixion of Joshua.

The player is presented with two perhaps not mutually exclusive standpoints from Silverhand. One is that the crucifixion recording is corporate exploitation; the megacorps will keep manipulating everybody while the masses continue to believe in their pipedreams. And at the same time, Joshua is a real rebel. In spite of the exploitation, he is committing to an act so disruptive and counter-cultural that he encapsulates a true revolutionary mind-set. The bleak outcome is that his revolutionary act of self-sacrifice does not appear to change anything, and the megacorporation is apparently the only beneficiary of Joshua's crucifixion.

¹⁸ See e.g.: King, *Reclaiming the Radical Economic Message of Luke*.

¹⁹ On these pericopes, see also e.g.: York, *The Last Shall Be First*.

²⁰ See, for example, the following Reddit posts and comments: Tomgar, "I had a, umm... Visceral reaction to Sinnerman;" Readous, "This Felt Wrong:" "So, I just crucified Joshua and I'm at a loss for words."

²¹ Tomgar, "I had a, umm..."

²² This perceived lack of choice has also been criticised by players online, see for example: U/[deleted], "Just bought the game;" Chorkpop, "The Joshua Stephenson questline;" XDestron, "You can't even influence the outcome of choice-based sidequests."

The Bible and the themes of *Cyberpunk 2077*

During the game, just before Joshua Stephenson asks V to pray with him, V can pick up a data shard titled ‘The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments’. In reality, the only readable text for the player is Qohelet 9:1–6 in the World English Version, which focuses on the idea that everybody, the good and the wicked, will come to the same end: death.²³ The choice of this wisdom literature is intriguing given the quantity of moral choices and deaths that feature in the game. The overarching storyline of the game has been about the use of technology in extending or otherwise enhancing human life, whether by having one’s consciousness transferred to virtual space, or having one’s body cybernetically enhanced. The biblical view, as presented by the game creator’s choice of biblical text, is apparently that death cannot be escaped. Regardless of the choices one makes, whether somebody does good deeds or bad deeds, somebody sacrifices or does not sacrifice, the end is the same. Whether your mind exists without a body or you implant cybernetic organs and bones, death will still be inevitable.

Indeed, in the game endings, either Johnny dies because V does not allow his soulless construct to continue inhabiting their body, or V’s soul is destroyed in order to allow Silverhand the use of the body. In the former case, V becomes a legend at the merc bar *Afterlife* – another nod to a form of immortality, here through memorialisation and admiration. If neither of these options are desired the player can choose to have V leave Night City with a group of Nomads, but without a cure V will die in six months. Alternatively, the player can opt to die by suicide.

Joshua Stephenson dies, though his death is exploited by the braindance studio and corp in order to make a profit. Johnny Silverhand nevertheless regards Stephenson as a true rebel in that he is making an authentic stand to try and change the world. Silverhand does not go as far as to say that there is a God, or heaven, or other kind of life after death, but this surprising take from the usually cynical rocker suggests a slightly more sympathetic stance than the other uses of biblical texts discussed above. While on the one hand the game is criti-

cal of the ways in which some biblical texts can easily be employed to endorse violence, the perspective from Silverhand suggests that if people were willing to live like Jesus Christ, by acting counter-culturally, then the world could be different. Imitating Jesus like Joshua Stephenson could be, in its authenticity, the real way to be a rebel. The player does not know, of course, whether Jesus would have agreed to cybernetic implants or to having his consciousness uploaded to the Net.

There is one biblical character that CD Projekt RED employs in the game that may be interpreted as a perspective on these technological advancements of the cyberpunk world. Adam Smasher is a loyal body guard of Yorinobu Arasaka. He stands several heads taller than any other character, and very little of his human body remains as flesh, the majority of it being replaced after he was crushed in the attack on Arasaka Tower in the 2020s. He agreed to become a cyborg by having a ‘full body conversion’, but this has left him, as described by the game, as more machine than man. His biblical namesake, Adam, the first man, is pointedly no longer identifiable in Adam Smasher. He lives to repay Arasaka for his body transplant and will destroy any of the corporation’s enemies. Beyond that, he has no empathy for humanity. He comments on a woman who walks past him saying ‘You look like a cut of fuckable meat...’ exaggerating the difference between himself as a metallic, indestructible killing machine, and a vulnerable, fleshy human. The cybernetic body he now uses to exist has rendered him un-Adam, unhuman. Perhaps then this game is positing that the more of your body you replace with machinery the less human you become, thus Genesis 2 may be considered as some kind of objection to the overuse of cybernetic body parts.

Conclusions

It is remarkable, at first glance, that a cyberpunk action adventure video game would include so much biblical material. The employment of biblical texts and tropes in *Cyberpunk 2077* is not for the most part used to grapple with the questions of existence in cyberspace or the use of technological implants as means to transcend humanity. Instead, other religions, Voodoo, Buddhism, and new

²³ For a detailed analysis of this pericope see: Krüger, Dean, and Baltzer, *Qoheleth*, 166–171; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 439–453.

forms of occultism are found to be more effective tools to stimulate reflection on how technology is impacting the ‘authentic’ human experience. The typical ‘western’ religious ideology, dominated by Christianity, appears in the game to be largely silent on these matters. Christian modes of thinking about humanity in the face of the potential technological advances showcased in cyberpunk worlds are unequipped to meaningfully engage with the challenges they raise. Other religious traditions are invoked and idealised, perhaps in appropriated forms, in the wake of the ‘emptiness’ of dominant Christian ideologies.²⁴ Christianity-inflected belief systems arguably do not help us understand whether an engram of somebody’s consciousness can attain salvation, or whether cyberpsychos overloaded with implants are no longer made in God’s image. In Night City, the Bible is however used as a means to justify violence as some kind of divine justice, or else the inspiration to die by crucifixion to deter the world from its violent ways. If the majority of people believe that human transcendence can be obtained through the purchase of cybernetic implants or by uploading their consciousness to the Net, then the Bible and the Church’s monopoly on a hope for the afterlife has become redundant. On the other hand, Adam Smasher’s characterisation would infer that the human experience is lost, rather than enhanced, through the overuse of cyberware. Reverend Colver’s early appearance in *Cyberpunk 2077* is not mirrored at the end of the game with some kind of reassurance that western Christianity will be able to sustain the human experience. Joshua Stephenson’s crucifixion does not affect any observable change in the population of Night City, it only serves to perpetuate profit and capitalism. Overall, CD Projekt RED’s intention to include religions in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* because they are an important aspect of society today is certainly realised. The portrayals provide opportunities for the player to consider what larger repercussions may be on the horizon for our human self-understanding as corporations begin to use new technology to sell us body parts and purchase the ‘security’ of our souls. The presence of the Bible in this video game, particularly the controversial crucifixion questline, has an ambivalent message. The game levels a critical eye at the ways in which biblical texts are appealed to in support of violence and exploitation, but simultaneously shows that biblical texts may lend power to unsettling voices of resistance by the oppressed in the midst of that very same capitalist exploitation.

²⁴ Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, 58–59.

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THE BIBLE GAME

AN ORAL HISTORY (INTERVIEW)

Robert Denton Bryant, Les Pardew, and David Todd

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If one wishes to study the interrelationship between Bible and video games, one can focus on the characters enacting their role on the textual stage, the communication between the text-internal author and text-internal reader, including biblical intertextuality, and on the text-external author, the actual developers of a given video game, and text-external reader (see introduction for methodological terminology). Many contributions to this edited volume are focusing on text-internal (intertextual) communication. Nevertheless, the ‘voice of the developer’ is also a very interesting and highly instructive perspective on their relation between games and Bible.

Especially for our edited volume, Robert Denton Bryant has interviewed two game developers, Les Pardew and David Todd, who have been actually involved in the creation of two Bible games, which happen to share the name *The Bible Game* (2005). *The Bible Game* for PlayStation 2 and Xbox was developed by Mass Media, Inc., of Moorpark, California. In it, players compete in a television game show by answering quiz questions based on the Bible and playing mini-games.

The Bible Game for Game Boy Advance was developed by Alpine Studios, Inc., of American Fork, Utah. In that version, players must move through levels to collect pieces of the Armor of God by defeating enemies and answering quiz questions. Both games were published by Crave Entertainment, Inc.

At the time of the games' release, Mr. Les Pardew was the principal of Alpine Studios and David Todd was the principal of Mass Media. Mr. Robert Denton Bryant was studio director of Crave Entertainment in 2004. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

The Genesis of *The Bible Game*

Robert Denton Bryant

I'm excited about interviewing you both and putting together this oral history, because there's a certain *Rashōmon* aspect to it. Everybody remembers events a little differently, based on their perspective.

Les, we had a meeting in my office at Crave early in 2004, and you showed me this PC CD-ROM title you had self-published that was basically a trivia game. Well, it was a trivia quiz. There wasn't much game to it.

Les Pardew

I remember that. It had a really goofy name. It was called *LDS: Do You Know?* There was a big question mark on the front of the game box, and it was sold as a CD-ROM product in a DVD case through LDS bookstores.

[“LDS” refers to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The back of the *LDS: Do You Know?* package touted “Hundreds of Hours of Family Fun” for “Ages Sunbeam to High Priest.” Its features included “thousands of gospel questions, 10 gospel topics, up to four players, six difficulty settings,” and individual or team play.]

Robert Denton Bryant

What I liked about the idea of Bible trivia—even though I hate saying “trivia” when it comes to the Bible, so let's say quiz—is that it was an approach to making a game while also being respectful.

Les Pardew

We had some success with [*LDS: Do You Know?*], and thought we could do this for the broader Christian market, because back then, I'd been in discussions with a lot of evangelical groups who were involved in making motion pictures for the Christian community. There are a lot of Christian movies that have come out since then, and some of them actually are pretty decent, and they have good star power. They're getting theatrical releases, not just straight-to-video releases. They have good, uplifting messages. Back when we were first talking about it, there were movies like *The Omega Code*, and those were really bad.

People who have faith aren't interested in the woke stuff that Disney is putting out, and that all of these other companies are doing. They don't want to take their kids to it. They don't want that kind of influence. I think that there is still a good market out there for motion pictures and video games and content that reflects Christian moral concepts. That's kind of what we were thinking of with *The Bible Game*. There's so much bloody and violent content in the video game industry. And let's be frank, most of it is made by nerds, and it's their fantasies we're playing out in video games.

But why not create something that's good, that has good moral value to it? So that brings us to the Bible. I mean, the Bible is such a wonderful book, full of wonderful teachings that are timeless. The things the Savior taught—people can't improve on those. Why not teach that, or at least explore it in a video game setting?

Robert Denton Bryant

David, was doing this game meaningful to you at all?

David Todd

My wife and I were going to church in the early 2000s, and we wanted our kids to go to church.

We had three kids, and we wanted them brought up with faith. And we didn't feel like the school system really did much in the way of teaching morality to kids. So, yeah, I was interested in it, probably more than most of the people in my company were. But I never, within the company, talked about that aspect of it. It's not my place to preach to individuals in my company.

We were very—agnostic is not the right word—but we just didn't ever discuss it at work. But as a family we listened to Christian music and Christian rock, and liked that. My wife was raised Catholic, and we switched over to a more evangelical-type faith. So, I liked that we were doing [*the game*]. But I wasn't pushing it hard on anybody inside the company. That would not have been a good idea.

Robert Denton Bryant

What Les brought in was a CD-ROM game, not a console game. One of the things that I got very good at Crave, where I had very low budgets, but had to make credible products to get onto the PlayStation 2, was understanding what Sony [Sony Computer Entertainment America—now Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC—was the Sony Corporation subsidiary that controlled the PlayStation brand in North America] reacted well to in terms of video games. They would want it to play like a video game. They would want it to be in real-time rendered 3D and they would want some type of twitch element to it. It's the difference between lean-forward versus sit-back kind of gameplay. And so I knew this was going to be a challenge.

I thought we would need a developer that was as enthusiastic about it as Les and I were. Who would take the job seriously and not do anything cynical with it, but also who had chops—who had a proven track record creating games on the PlayStation 2.

That's when we reached out to you, David, and said we want to do a Bible game. And I might have said, very cynically, that I wanted to get a game behind the glass at Walmart. I felt we could do that if we had “red state” content, and the Bible is for everybody. But the Bible is something that speaks particularly to so much of America.

Crave had games in Walmart, but our games were in the “dump bins” in the aisles with other discounted video games. We'd be in the value programs around the holidays, but we wanted stores to carry it as an individual title, side-by-side on the shelf with games from the big publishers. I had always wanted to get a game “behind the glass” at Walmart. Crave Entertainment at the time specialized in “value” games [*low-budget games at retail prices of \$20 or less*] and because we were owned by a distribution company, we could get into discount programs at retailers, where we could do high sales volumes at low profit margins. We didn't compete in the big-budget, “AAA” game space, because it was highly competitive and we worked with lower production budgets and almost no marketing budgets. But if you wanted to be displayed at Walmart or Target or Best Buy side-by-side with the “AAA” games, you had to have a very compelling story to tell the retailers. And *The Bible Game* was unique, and so I'm proud that in some stores we were on display next to the *Halos*, and the *FIFAs* and the *Grand Theft Autos*.

We achieved this the prior year with *World Championship Poker*. That was, obviously, a very different game. So, the next year, in some stores, you saw *The Bible Game* and *World Championship Poker* on the same retail shelf, both published by Crave. And it's ironic that the success of our poker game allowed us to green-light *The Bible Game*.

Les Pardew

I think that was one of the biggest comical reactions that I would get from other game developers. I would talk about the fact that we were doing *The Bible Game* and doing it with Crave.

Robert Denton Bryant

Yeah, it was not exactly on-brand for us.

Les Pardew

But we said Crave was the only publisher that took a chance on it, they saw the vision, and it was profitable for them and for us.

Robert Denton Bryant

I really liked the challenge of doing this, but there were weeks and months at Crave where I was laughed at by my colleagues at our internal weekly publishing meeting. We had to overcome a lot of skepticism. For months it was listed on the agenda in our publishing meetings as “Bob Bryant’s Bible Challenge,” kind of sarcastically. It was like, “Bob has this crazy idea.” It wasn’t my idea *per se*, but I fought for it, and they were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt as long as I got concept approval.

[Concept approval is the process by which video game console manufacturers curate those video games available for their platforms in North America. This process doesn’t exist in Europe, as the EU sees it as anticompetitive. At the time, both the PlayStation and Xbox organizations in North America were concerned with keeping their game libraries from bloating with low-quality games. Even though third-party publishers like Crave financed, marketed, and distributed their own games, they were contractually required to seek concept approval from Sony and Microsoft before committing funding to a game project.]

The big hurdle to get over was to convince Sony and Microsoft and Nintendo that this was a worthwhile game that was not going to be like *Bible Adventures*, which was an unlicensed game for the Nintendo Entertainment System [*published by Wisdom Tree*] back in 1991.

So, we brought Mass Media in and you all wrote a great game proposal. I went to Sony and said, here’s what we’ve got. We’ve got Mass Media. We’ve got their track record. We got a great mini-game collection. You’ve seen what they can do in terms of collections of mini-games. We were going to treat the Bible respectfully, but we still wanted it to be a video game.

But Sony rejected the initial proposal. I had a good relationship with them. Mark Vitello was at that time the head of the Product Evaluation Group. He was like the head nerd in charge. If he liked your game, you were greenlit. And he said to me, “this feels like a game that I would be forced to play in Sunday School instead of a game I would choose to play on a Monday afternoon.” And I took that to heart. Their second concern was that they didn’t feel there were enough quiz questions. One of the problems with any sort of question-based gameplay is that—especially if the questions come up at random—players quickly get repeat questions if the pool of questions isn’t big enough. So, we committed to including hundreds more quiz questions.

David Todd

You were interacting with the [console] manufacturers directly. We were never really in that middleman position that you were in. Almost always, a publisher would come to us with a proposal, and they already had a concept, and we would try to put flesh on that concept.

I don’t remember the budget, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was over \$1.2 million, in that range for that point in time.

Robert Denton Bryant

That seems right.

David Todd

So, when you look at those numbers, you think, I need this many programmers, I need to do this many mini-games, what can we actually accomplish for this number? That's ultimately what we had to do. I suspect you didn't raise the budget. I suspect we just said we'll make it work.

Robert Denton Bryant

Raising the budget doesn't sound like me. Well, it sounds like me because I'm a very generous person and I love developers. But it doesn't sound like my bosses at that time.

David Todd

You may not remember this, but our real name for the game was *Do Unto Others*.

Robert Denton Bryant

That is, creatively, a better name. Absolutely. I remember you getting really upset because you delivered this really cool logo designed around that title. But internally, the Crave senior managers didn't like to spend a lot of money on marketing. The game had to sell itself from the shelf, and you never get a second chance to make a first impression. The names have to be simple.

David Todd

"Poker." "Bible."

Robert Denton Bryant

"Racing." Exactly. I never got this green lit, but I was working with a different developer, and I wanted to do a dinosaur hunting game, and I came up with a name that I loved, *Savage Safari*. Sony and Microsoft were okay with the name. They thought it was cool. But my own people at Crave objected, because it

didn't have the word "hunting" in it. I was like, "safari" doesn't say hunting to you?" But our CEO looked me square in the eye, and he said, "our audience is simple people," which was his polite way of saying they don't know fancy three-syllable words like safari.

David Todd

That's wrong. That was wrong.

Robert Denton Bryant

I apologize for us not being able to ship the game as *Do Unto Others*, because that was the more creative title. But I think *The Bible Game* got us more publicity.

David Todd

But we kept it as the name of the game show and used the logo in the game. The name on the box is *The Bible Game*. But in the game world, it's still *Do Unto Others*.

Designing the Gameplay

Robert Denton Bryant

When you turned to your team at Mass Media and said we're thinking about doing a game based on the Bible, what was the reaction internally?

David Todd

Half of the people were not interested. We were a small company. We probably had 35 people or so at that point, and about half were very young, whereas the other half were just pragmatic. There were not a lot of religious people at all in the programming department. The younger generation of programmers just

wasn't interested. Younger people want to do stuff that they're going to have fun doing.

But half of our people had started writing games back before there were machines to write games on. So that group was fine with the idea. This is a game. We're still programmers. We still like programming. And it's programming. Whatever you put up on the screen almost doesn't matter. It's still a video game. So, from that standpoint it wasn't that tough. There were a few people who said they weren't interested, but they ultimately didn't care. They're writing a little mini-game. They're fun. They're fine with that. So it wasn't that tough a sell internally or anything. It was just like, Yeah, I'd rather be doing, you know, *Grand Theft Auto*.

And I had my director of design, Paul Mithra. He explored in his life a lot of religions, and he was a musician, and a writer, and he just was always interested in everything. So, for him it was not a problem. David Riordan, who I ended up bringing in because we needed a dedicated designer for the broader game, including the trivia and the Bible-specific content. He was very interested in exploring all that stuff. He's worked with indigenous nations and does a lot of tribal history and things like that. So, he was interested in it. Paul was interested. That was more than enough to do what we needed to do anyway. We did have fun, I would say.

Robert Denton Bryant

How did you and your teams make these particular game designs? Given the broad subject matter, how did you start to connect the Bible and concepts in it to gameplay?

Les Pardew

One of the things a lot of people don't really understand is that as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we revere the Bible. We study the Bible every bit as much as any other Christian religion. We just have other books that we believe are also Scripture. That's the only difference. Our little

development group here in Utah knew the Bible stories, and we had hundreds of ideas of things that we could come up with for the game. But the thing that stuck with us was the fiery darts of the Adversary [*Ephesians 6:16*]. And going and getting the different aspects of the armor of God [*Ephesians 6:13*] lends itself to a video game environment. And then you can use that environment as a segue into Bible knowledge. If you remember right, the guys at Mass Media actually hired us to come up with their quiz questions.

Robert Denton Bryant

I'd forgotten that.

Les Pardew

It's because most game developers back at that time, who may have thought of themselves as Christians, weren't necessarily Christian scholars. But my team had a pretty deep background in the history and the teachings that are found in the Bible, so it wasn't a big leap for us to be able to come up with engaging questions. And they weren't questions about doctrine. They were questions about content. "What did Jonah get swallowed by?" That kind of thing.

It was stuff that would be universal that every person who is a Christian would not be offended by. We weren't coming out and saying you have to baptize by immersion, and that the host actually turns into the body of Christ. We didn't do that. But what we did do is teach about the Bible. We wanted the game to be actually a fun way for kids to learn about the stories in the Bible. That was our motivation. We wanted the game to appeal not just to Presbyterians, and not just to Catholics, but about the Bible, which we all accept. All of the Christian religions accept the Bible, and I think that that was a smart way to go about it.

Robert Denton Bryant

I agree, and I think that we had a couple goals. One of them was, very early on, we figured that we wanted the game to be inclusive. We wanted to do a Bible game that even maybe Jewish kids could enjoy. And I think, if I'm remember-

ing right, we declared the New Testament sort of off-limits.

David Todd

A lot of the content was based on the Old Testament. That was part of the whole kind of concept that if we stay in the Old Testament, especially with the mini-games, we'd have potentially a broader market appeal. We were being inclusive rather than exclusive.

Les Pardew:

We had New Testament content in there, because that's where the Armor of God came from, and the Jesus episode with the Tempter, the Adversary. The New Testament was an integral part of what we did. But there were plenty of questions from the Old Testament. Because it's all in the same book. It would have been cool if we could have had some stuff from the Apocrypha and some of the other obscure writings.

Robert Denton Bryant

That would have been a good sequel. Or doing separate books of the Apocrypha as DLC.

Les Pardew

But the point is that we were very cognizant of the fact that this needed to bridge the gaps between the Christian world rather than divide, and I think that that's what we encouraged.

David Todd

Our first goal was to put together some mini-games, because we were ready to produce mini-games in an easy way. It's easy to design the game show, and you can do that in the writing, but ultimately the mini-games are the real interaction. Everything else is kind of like a menu with narration wrapped around.

Yes, it's a game to throw a timer in there. But ultimately, we started with probably three prototype mini-games. That was probably one of our first deliverables after we signed the contract.

And I remember the "Stairway to Heaven" mini-game, we had the Led Zeppelin song playing behind the game, which was pretty cool. And we had the "Jonah and the Whale" mini-game as the second one. We were using rock music as just placeholder music, but it was really hard to get rid of "Stairway to Heaven," since we had been playing it with that track for so long. But I like the contemporary Christian rock we replaced it with, and it did give it kind of an uplifting pop music thing, which I thought was good for the target market.

[The console versions of The Bible Game included licensed music from, "the hottest Christian artists, including TobyMac, Newsboys, Kutless, Jeremy Camp, and more."]

Every time we make a game, any game, we're always like, "How do we broaden its appeal?" And sometimes you have to get racier to broaden the appeal. Sometimes, like in this case, you don't. When you're targeting what we always felt was a family market, where, of course, the teenagers do not want to play this game. The adults are willing to play the game with their kids, but the teenagers don't want to play it, and they may be pulled in as a family thing, maybe.

Marketing the Bible

Robert Denton Bryant

Les, in 2004 you took me to one of the most interesting meetings I've ever had, which was with Matt Crouch at his facility in the Cahuenga Pass in Studio City, California. He had taken over the old Hanna-Barbera Cartoons building. He couldn't have been more gracious or generous with his time, and the three of us just got to know each other, and learned about each other's businesses. I remember he was as curious about the video game world as we were about Christian marketing and Christian filmmaking. And he knew his father's business, because he's the son of televangelist Paul Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting

Network [TBN, *one of the largest religious television networks in North America*]. Paul's movie studio was at that point in time just beginning to produce some Biblical movies, primarily for the home video market.

Les Pardew

That was a fascinating learning experience. They were early pioneers in the mass Christian market, and that's kind of what I would call it. Prior to that there were just a lot of mom-and-pop Christian bookstores across the United States and there were no real mainstream quality products for that market. And that was true then even of my church, the LDS church. There was a gap between niche market quality and mainstream quality, but that gap has closed a lot in the last 20 years.

What I'm finding is that part of the reason that gap has narrowed has got to be technology. Back 20 years ago, if you wanted to make a movie, it was expensive. If you wanted to make a video game it cost a lot of money. And now, the tools have gotten so good that you can make quality products for a fraction of what it cost back then, because you don't have to pay the labor cost you used to. I think that's been a big driving force in narrowing that gap and getting better products on the shelves.

Robert Denton Bryant

But that has been a double-edged sword, hasn't it? The difference in the last 20 years is that the barriers to entry and delivering a minimum viable product are so low. You can come up with an idea, you can develop it yourself, and you publish it yourself. That's the good news.

The bad news is, so can everyone else, so the marketing piece is crucial. That's what you and I began to try to solve at the very beginning of *The Bible Game*. How do we get this product to the mainstream?

My biggest take-away from that meeting with Matt Crouch was that the Christian bookstore market was sizable but very fragmented and very cantankerous,

and very mom-and-pop. And it was a revelatory moment when he said that you can reach the Christian market through mass retailers. Christians will find it. People looking for that content will find it.

I remember him telling us that he and his dad went into Walmart, and they sneaked a camera in, and used guerilla filmmaking to record a TV spot for TBN. They shot his dad in the home video section of Walmart holding up a copy of whatever their latest release was, saying, "This is in Walmart! Come get it!" And if Walmart ever found out about that, they probably would have blown their stack. But what it said to their viewers was you can find our content at mainstream retailers. And I think at that point we kind of followed that model.

Les Pardew

As a developer, I have no say in the marketing of it. They have their own ideas. Could they have done better? Possibly? But for a product like that to have done as well as it did. It was rare at that time that you could get a Game Boy Advance game to sell over 100,000 units, and we were right there. To me I felt like it was a commercial success. I think we could have done a couple of sequels with it, and I think they would have been done well. We could have improved upon the different things that we were doing there.

But the fact is that it was clear that the people there [*at Crave*] were video game people and they didn't see the vision that you saw with it. But, hey, we got a product.

Robert Denton Bryant

I'm glad that there were royalty checks. I do know that the game had an impact beyond the gaming press. I think that the gaming press at the time was like, "it can't be good, because it's about the Bible."

But I'll give Crave marketing the credit for some of this. They were able to kind of prime the pump. There was some mainstream coverage of a Bible-based video game as a news event. I remember one of the only times that my parents

were even aware of what I did for a living was when they asked me, “did you hear about this video game about the Bible?” And I was like, “yes, I’ve heard of that.” And when they found out I was present at the beginning, they were almost impressed. For two people who have never, ever played video games in their life to be aware of it because they saw it on CNN or Fox News—I think that it made a minor but not insignificant cultural impact in the U.S.

David Todd

We basically got average reviews, which was pretty good. If you look at just like any kind of Christian outlet or publication, we got great reviews. But in the game industry [press] as a whole, we were never going to get good reviews.

Robert Denton Bryant

A lot of them were outright hostile. In one I re-read recently the reviewer clearly just saw the words *The Bible Game* and got butthurt. It also triggered in this particular reviewer memories of some of those NES-era, religiously themed games [published by Wisdom Tree, Inc.]. So our games were guilty by association, even though they’re much better. I think that there are just a lot of people who have a lot of prejudice about this category, they’ll review the category. They’ll review the concept of a Bible game rather than what you all executed in the games themselves.

David Todd

And when they review it, they review it like a teenager, or a 20-something gamer. We were targeting this younger group which was really the market. I’m not trying to be crazy about this, but you’re indoctrinating your children into Christian beliefs, part of that process is making it entertaining, making it fun.

Les Pardew

There are so many video games, you’re lucky if you break even. I think that Crave should have run with that. They should have done sequels.

Robert Denton Bryant

Well, we did see Crave do a couple of *Poker* sequels, and they did a sequel to *Pinball Hall of Fame*. But there was a change of management, including me.

I left the company right after *Poker* and *Pinball* were published, and *The Bible Game* was the next year. The last thing I did was to put the deal for *The Bible Game* together and get the game concept approved.

Is there a Future for Faith based Games?

Robert Denton Bryant

Since we did *The Bible Game*, there has been this explosion of Indie publishing and app stores worldwide, so I need to be careful when I make a claim like ours was the last game based on the Bible. But it certainly was the last Bible game in the console space.

Les Pardew

Why do you think that is?

Robert Denton Bryant

It’s a good question. Early in the app era, when you could do a small little game and put it on the app store, and hope you find a niche audience because it speaks directly to that, like I have had in the back of my mind a million game ideas right? And one of the really, I thought interesting ideas would be a series of games or a game that was kind of an anthology based on *The Lives of the Saints*. Because I’m at a Catholic school and I’m culturally a Catholic, even if I’m not baptized. And I thought that there’s a lot of really interesting material there. Maybe it’s a visual novel, or maybe it’s different mini-games that would reflect episodes in the lives of certain saints. And I’ve never done the market analysis to see whether somebody hasn’t already had this idea. Could you do

a game for Catholic folks, for example, that makes the material more vital because you're actually doing actions? Because you're actually playing the story of some of these significant saints? And it would have to be something that was done very respectfully, and also feel like a video game, and those are hard dots to connect, as we know. Not to be crass, but could you shoot the arrows at St. Sebastian? That would be awful.

I still believe in this market. I still believe that we can experiment with doing faith-based video games. There's a lot of untapped people out there who would respond to content like this. Maybe not content exactly like this, because I'd like to see different game genres being explored.

David Todd

You can have this. I don't want any kind of rights to it. I think you do a *Pokémon Go* version of a religious experience where you go to important locations and you find things. I think you could do a pretty cool Bible-based game like that, and it would be pretty interesting.

Robert Denton Bryant

So this is just guys spit-balling, but it shows you that this wants to be a category, but it's still a very small category, I think.

David Todd

I think the problem is, what you really need, you need funding. And the funding needs to come from a church or a religious organization, and not from a video game publisher. Because you can't compete. You need production values that are competitive. And it's just really hard to do for these low budgets. Very hard.

Robert Denton Bryant

Yeah, it's hard to do. And it's hard to get the secular companies enthusiastic

about it, because it's risky for them. It's really risky.

David Todd

For us at Mass Media, we were doing games for everybody. So for us it wasn't like any big risk. We never feared that we were going to be identified this way. It was just another game for us.

Les Pardew

We got it out, and it served that market, and I think the people who played it liked it, and had fun with it. I don't think that they played it just in Sunday School. I think they played it at home.

The above interview provides a good insight into the position of the text-external author in the video game creation process. Elements such as one's own background, the available knowledge of the subject of the video game and the contingency in the creation process all have their specific role. In that sense, the origins of a video game also resemble the origins of biblical texts themselves, in which these aspects also play a role. In fact, every process of origin has at least also an undocumented history of orality.

GAMEPLAY, BIBLICAL TEXT, AND WHAT DRIVES THE PROPHET

HOW STUDENTS TURNED CALL NARRATIVES
INTO A VIDEO GAME

Richard J. Bautch

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We begin with a vignette: One day a team of undergraduate students were working around a seminar table. “No, wait a minute,” interrupts Stephanie. “We’re talking about gameplay and about the biblical text, but we really need to find what’s driving this prophet from deep within himself.” What drives a prophet, what compels an Amos or an Ezekiel to press on even through challenges? As the students grappled with this most important question, their learning led them to design and build a video game with a prophet as the player.

At my institution we offer a Senior Seminar as part of the Religious Studies major. When I teach the course, students learn about biblical prophecy and the meaning that prophecy has had, in antiquity as well as in subsequent times, especially today. One important focus of the course is the critical study of the text. Students employ both literary critical and historical critical tools that were gained in earlier, introductory courses in biblical studies. Typically, students enjoy this aspect of the course and they excel in it. They love learning, for example, that the phrase “day of the Lord” in Amos is highly ironic

and would have jolted people's consciences in the eighth century. Such questions of conscience and values lead to another, equally important focus in the course. Students build a video game that allows them to explore prophetic values and apply them to everyday life. They called their game: The Mini-Adventures: Prophets Edition. How does this happen? Each of the course's five modules presents different prophets who do special work in the world among God's people. Through studying these individuals, students begin to draw a picture of a purposeful life lived according to values and principles. They extend the picture by building a video game in which the five modules of the course become five levels in the game. Students create prophetic characters and put them in action to face new challenges that test a player's skill and understanding. In doing so, the students begin to tell their own stories as well in prophetic terms. That is, they allow their creativity as well as those values they share with the prophets to play out on the screen in highly original adventures.

In the game they designed, the retro look is very intentional. It's skeletal, it's sketchy and 2D. It's like a prototype. It's devoid of details to focus on the concepts. It doesn't compare to games on the market today, but pedagogically it's effective. The game as genre allows students to take core elements (concepts) of biblical prophecy and recontextualizing them in way meaningful to today's student.

Design of the Project

Story

It should come as no surprise that story is the salient feature of the project. For our purposes, story rises above the other elements of a video game, including the tech and the game play. While all the elements are indispensable and work in concert, story is paramount. Creating a video game based on the biblical prophets requires telling a story about figures who recall and to some degree resemble Amos or Ezekiel or Micah. The emphasis on story is not unique to our classroom as it reflects a trend in the industry. In their 2015 book *Slay the Dragon: Writing Great Video Games*, Robert Denton Bryant and Keith Giglio sug-

gest that we are in "the golden age of interactive storytelling." (84) They quote one game director who said that the creative direction of the script holds more importance than the graphics of the game. The video game is, in its essence, the occasion to craft a story. Moreover the video game is an art form and should be thought of as such.

When the students building the video game endeavor to tell a story, it is to their advantage that the biblical "books" of the prophets are typically not stories, or narratives, but they are, as we know, collections of oracles attributed to an individual who may or may not be historical. Literary critical study of the genre is crucial here. As a result, students cannot lift a story from the Bible and build the video game around it. Rather, they must think about all the elements in the text, how they interrelate, and what they mean. They must take apart the text and then reassemble some of that in the story of the video game. It requires them to be original, creative and to drill down to the level of values and meaning and recontextualize these in an altogether different medium, the video game.

Collaboration

Given the central role of interactive game studies in the project, this innovation required collaboration. Accordingly, the students in RELS 4342 Senior Seminar worked with peers from the Interactive Game Studies major (IGST), and the faculty of these two majors collaborated as well. As the course was taught in Fall semester, during the Summer I worked with IGST students who were mastering Game Maker Studio, software for building video games. I also reached out to IGST faculty, and we began to discuss the course structure whereby our students together would build a video game featuring the biblical prophets. *Slay the Dragon: Writing Great Video Games* became assigned reading for RELS 4342 Senior Seminar. The book provides a clear treatment of story and much more; it serves as a roadmap for building a video game by explaining the game world, story and character, gameplay, levelling up, and more.

Structure and Design

The project's structure aligned with the larger design of the course, RELS 4342 Senior Seminar. The course comprised five modules, each two weeks in duration, with the class meeting on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The modules were designated according to the prophetic figure we studied:

Module One: Micah and Amos – Prophets Struggling Against Human Forces

Module Two: Moses – The Backstory of God Calling People to be Prophets

Module Three: Isaiah and Ezekiel – Prophets Encountering the Awesome God

Module Four: Jeremiah and Elijah – Prophets in a Quest for Identity

Module Five: The Disciples and Apostles – The Call to Follow Jesus

In a given module, the first three class days involved textual study, discussion, and presentations by groups of students. On the fourth day, always a Thursday, the IGST students joined the class and became part of the discussion (the IGST students were given the biblical texts about the prophets in advance). On that day, the discussion turned to the project. Ideas generated in a given class were then taken by the IGST students to incorporate into the game. Two weeks later, all the students together reviewed the progress made on the game, and the cycle repeated.

By the end of the semester, the students had designed four of the game's five levels, and they had built (using Game Maker Studio software) the first level with two players advancing from the hinterlands all the way to the city. As you saw earlier, those two prophets use sheep to jump up and around obstacles, and along the way they collect scrolls to indicate their growing relationship with the word of God. When they reach the city, the first level ends and the second is to begin. In terms of completion, we did not expect to build the entire game with five levels in one semester. The project is large enough that it will be continued by future classes of students who enroll in a RELS course on proph-

ets, a course that will be crosslisted with IGST (in this course, IGST students earned elective credit for IGST 3399 Topics). The project was a success inasmuch as the students met the course goals by exploring the prophets' stories in order to retell them through a new medium, a video game. The students also assigned to produce a "game concept document" (GCD) that they wrote jointly. The rubric for the assignment was extensive with 14 separate categories. The students submitted a GCD that was 10 pages (2,500 words), which is commensurate with industry standards. They articulated all their key ideas in writing.

Value Added

As I reflect on my expectations, two predictors emerge. The lives of the biblical prophets are marked by urgency. Micah and Amos simply must announce God's will and God's word. A video game too would have us play fast and make quick, decisive moves. Additionally, the prophets live in the midst of the world's issues and challenges, and they speak to the population as a whole. There are no reclusive, introverted prophets, and no prophet is limited to a cult of followers. Similarly, a video game requires the player to move through the world; the story always unfolds in a societal context that forms part of a larger world within the game. My expectations were that through the aspects of urgency and the world of the game, a video game would take shape out of the biblical materials. And it did, thanks to the creators of the game, the students, who in the process of telling the story shared something of their own narrative as well.

The Project's Level of Innovation and High Impact

Interdisciplinarity

Not all schools have an IGST major, and having a flourishing IGST major at St. Edward's made this project possible. Remarkably, the IGST students were enthusiastic about the Bible and its stories. Many of them are budding humanists. At the same time, the RELS students all had experience with video games and contributed technical details to the project. STEM and the Humanities

complemented each other nicely. The blended cohort of students was interdisciplinary, and although this was not a stated goal of the project it was certainly one of those dividends that come when we innovate.

Student centered learning

In my experience, innovation brings about a seismic shift to more student-centered learning.¹ To be specific, it is the students' own learning process that drives the class. As the instructor, I do not know beforehand exactly how we will cover the subject matter. I select the core materials and set parameters, but the students give definition to the class. The shift to student-centered learning affords students deeper levels of involvement and ownership. Rather than adopting my ideas about a subject, they develop their own ideas, they discuss them with peers, they refine them through creative exercises and finally they own them. How was the video-game project in RELS 4342 Senior Seminar innovative? The project was student driven to such a degree that it epitomized innovative pedagogy as I have defined it, with the students at the center. I selected the prophets to be studied and the correlative biblical texts, but the students did the heavy lifting of studying the prophets and then creating a credible story on screen that is consistent with the prophets' biblical profiles. In their story, expressed as a video game, the prophets travel from the backwoods to the city and impact the world positively. Module after module, the students developed their story further with new adventures for additional prophetic figures. The work of creating the story and extending it over a semester was never a burden. In fact, the students relished this challenge and were energized intellectually. The project and the class were student centered by design.

¹ For more on innovation expressed as student-centered learning, see: "Books > Using student centered methods," Innovation in Teaching, accessed 1 September 2024, <https://innovationinteaching.org/books/using-student-centered-methods/>; "Innovative Methods for Student Centered Teaching," Clicks, <https://clicks.com/innovative-methods-for-student-centered-teaching/> [accessed 1 September 2024].

Epilogue

Student Learning Outcomes

1. A rigorous and thorough analysis of the biblical texts about the prophets;
2. The partial building of a video game featuring the prophets in new and original adventures that exhibit the values and principles established for the prophets in the Bible;
3. The application of the prophets' values and principles to the world of today, where the students ask their own questions of calling and vocation as they envision their own career pathway.

Assessment of the Project's Success and its Outcomes

The first item was assessed through a written textual analysis that the students wrote for each of the class's five modules. On a scale of 5, the mean scores were: 3.07, 4.19, 4.19, 4.31, 4.44.

The second item was assessed through a "game concept document" (GCD) assignment that the students wrote jointly. The rubric was extensive with 14 separate categories. The students submitted a GCD that was 10 pages (2,500 words), which is commensurate with industry standards. Both the IGST faculty and I graded the work.

The third item was assessed through a prompt included in the textual-analysis assignment: "In light of the text(s), reflect upon and respond to one of the following questions: What contributions do I want to make in my lifetime? How am I preparing to make these contributions? What do I value in life? How do I integrate my liberal arts learning/experience with complex problems in the world today?" The students' responses were consistently creative and authentic. See the scores listed above.

Continuous improvement: For this project to be enhanced, the students will think more deeply about the video game design as it relates to the value-driven context. Students will focus on the game's details and articulate what each represents before including it in the game. This line of development is already expressed in the feedback the instructors gave to the GCD: "Ask yourself, with each sentence, 'what questions am I creating here but not answering?'" For example, you refer several times to 'jumping on sheep' in the first level. What does that mean? What happens to the sheep? Do you ride them around? Do they disappear? Do you gain something from making them disappear?"

Rationale and Goal Statement

Creating a video game in the course on prophets relates to the learning outcome whereby students demonstrate the ability to recontextualize the biblical accounts of the prophets in new ways, with applications for their (the students) living more purposefully. Put differently, students who have majored or minored in Religious and Theological Studies are to consolidate and clarify their understanding of religion in order to identify and explore potential career pathways. And indeed, as students read about the prophets and identify with their stories, many begin to see the story as something upon which they could model their own life. While the university's QEP has evolved from reflecting on vocation to identifying career pathways, the constant is reflection upon one's working life at its deepest levels. St. Edward's University is asking its students to do the sort of work entailed in the Senior Seminar with respect to the prophets. To help students meet this challenge I have introduced a video game that serves as a bridge between antiquity and today, between the prophets' biography and the students' autobiography.

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INDEX OF REFERENCES

Genesis

6:12–14	18
6:17	18
6:19	18
7:16	21

Exodus

1:22	18
2:1–3	18
2:3	27
2:23–25	26
3:1–9	26
3:2–3	27
3:8	98
3:11–12	98
12–15	90, 100
13:17–14:31	20
13:21	100
15:1–20	70
15	100
15:3	70
15:24	27
16	100
16:2	27
16:7	27
16:8	27
17:3	27
20	100
21:23–25	118
32	27

Joshua

3:1–17	20
6:4	28
13:22	28

1 Samuel

17:32–35	18
17:49	22

2 Kings

24–25	90, 94
24:20	94

Ezra

1:1–4	96
1:2–4	98

Job

1:21	118
40–41	115

Psalms

11:6	118
23	97
38:5	118
44	77
44:2–3	77
44:26	77
74:14	115
77:21	97
78:51–52	97
80:2	96
90:12	119
104:26	115
126	95
128:5	59
137	63, 90, 94–95
137:5	63

Qohelet

3:1–8 118
9:1–6 126

Isaiah

2:2 54
35 81–82
35:10 81
40–48 75–76
40–55 71, 72, 75–76, 96–97
40:3–5 72
40:11 97
43:16–19 71, 72
44:28 71
45:1 71, 98
49 76
49–55 75–76
51:1–8 76
51:9 76
51:9–11 70, 72–77, 80–83, 85–86
51:9–16 76
51:11 72, 81
51:17 76
51:17–23 76
52:1 76
52:1–12 76
52:6 77
52:12 77
52:12–13 72
54 61
66:20 54

Jeremiah

2:4 61
2:5 61–62
4 60
4:7–8 61
4:8 61
4:23–26 60
19:8 62
19:15 61
25:11–12 95
25:34–38 61
29 90
29:4–7 95
48:10 118

Ezekiel

16 61–62
23 61–62
34:11–16 97

Daniel

9:20–23 95

Hosea

1–2 61–62

Matthew

1:20 25
2:1–12 22
2:7 40
2:11 40
2:13 25
2:13–15 22
2:19 25
4:19 36
5:14 53
5:39 118
6:9–13 122

Luke

2:21–38 22, 44
2:36 26
2:39 44
2:40 44
2:41 44
2:42 44
4:18–19 124
5:1–11 20
11:2–4 122
22:40–46 122
23:34 123
23:39 123
23:40 123
23:41–42 123
23:43 123
23:46 123

John

10:1–21 97

Acts

6:54–60 120

Galatians

5 30

Ephesians

6:13–18 29
6:13 145
6:16 145

1 Timothy

6:15 40

Revelation

12:3 78

INDEX OF VIDEO GAMES

4Him (see also: Sunday Funday)	34, 36
Adam's Venture (series)	14
Baby Moses (see also: Bible Adventures)	17, 20–22, 27
Bible Adventures	14, 16–19, 22, 37–38, 46, 141
Bible Buffet	30–31, 39, 45
Bible game, the	135–137, 139–140, 143, 147–148, 150–151
Binding of Isaac, the	7
Boulder Dash	26
Crystal Mines	17, 26, 28, 45
Cyberpunk 2077	9, 106–132
Daniel & the Lion's Den	14
David and Goliath (see also: Bible Adventures)	17, 21–22, 40, 44
Early Years of the King of Kings, the (see also: King of Kings, the)	22
Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land	26–28, 37, 39, 42–43, 45–46
Far Cry 5	7
Fishfall (see also: Sunday Funday)	34, 36, 40
Flight to Egypt (see also: King of Kings, the)	22, 24–25, 42
Hellraiser	31–32
Jesus and the Temple (see also: King of Kings, the)	22, 25–26, 42, 44
Joshua & the Battle of Jericho	28, 37, 39, 41–42, 45
King James Bible, the	33–34
King Neptune's Adventure	17
King of Kings, the	22–23, 31, 37, 39–41
Legend of Zelda, the	29

LOGOS Bible Video Game	14
Mass Effect (series)	9, 39, 74, 88–104
Menace Beach	17, 34–35, 45
Metal Fighter	17
Metro Exodus	7, 9, 68–87
NIV Bible & the 20 Lost Levels of Joshua	37
Noah's Ark (see also: Bible Adventures)	17, 19–21, 44
Pestertinator	17
Red Sea Crossing	14
Silent Hill (series)	9, 52–66
Spiritual Warfare	29–30, 39, 45–46
Sunday Funday	31, 34–36, 45–46
Super Mario Bros. 2	17
Super Noah's Ark 3D	14, 31–33, 37, 45
Wise Men, the (see also: King of Kings, the)	23–24, 26, 40
Wolfenstein 3D	31–32, 45

INDEX OF MODERN AUTHORS

Agten, Jean	38	Dean, O.C.	126
Angry Video Game Nerd	16	Dempsey, Carol J.	59
Anthony, Jason	117	Deshbandhu, Aditya	109, 111
		Detweiler, Craig	8
Bainbridge, William S.	8	Dinkler, Erich	17
Baltzer, Klaus	126	Dinkler-von Schubert, Erika	17
Barstad, Hans M. A.	97	Durham, Gabe	16, 31–32
Beddows, Amy	55–56		
Behr, John	17	Edwards, K.	118
Birk, Max V.	109	Ego, Beate	120
Blenkinsopp, Joseph	54, 60		
Blyth, Caroline	118	Feinman, Peter	70
Boda, Mark J.	59	Fishbane, Michael	60
Bodenhamer, K. W.	59	Foster, Robert L.	59
Bonner, F.	108		
Bosman, Frank G.	7–8, 14–15, 38, 90, 97	Gard, Elizabeth	16
Brueggemann, Walter A.	42	Gard, Ron	16
		Geek History	16
Campbell, Heidi	8	Geller, J.	111
Carroll, James	54	Girard, Marc	21
Carroll, Robert P.	59, 94	Green, Amy	7
Cavallaro, D.	128	Grieve, Gregory	8
Chicka, Benjamin	8	Gruen, Erich S.	96
Ching-I Teng	109		
Childs, Brevard S.	82–83	Halvorson-Taylor, Martien	96
Chorkpop	125	Hendel, Ronald	69–70
Clicks	160	Heschel, Susannah	95, 99, 112
Cogburn, Jon	14	Hill, Mark	16
Colette, S.	118	Hoffmeier, James K.	70
Colgan, Emily	118		
Coltrin, Chris	69	Iannone, Jason	16
Copier, Laura	14	IGN Staff	58
		Innovation in Teaching	160

Janzen, M.D.	70	O'Brien, Julia M.	61	Vander Stichele, Caroline	14
		Oliver, Zachery	14	Verderame, Lorenzo	21
Kalmanofsky, Amy	59, 62			Viviers, Hendrik	59
Kampling, Rainer	25	Pat the NES Punk	18		
Keble, John	17	Pitzele, Peter	38	Wagner, Rachel	8
Kent, Steven	16, 35			Weems, Renita J.	61
Kidger, Mark	24	Readous	125	Weidner, Daniel	95
Kim, Matt	107	Rehak, B.	109	Weis, Adolf	23
King, David D.M.	124	Rendsburg, Gary A.	70	Welton, Rebekah	7
Kirkland, Ewan	55–56	Roberts, J.J.M.	74	Wieringen,	
Kling, D.W.	69			Archibald L. H. M. van	7, 14–15, 21, 38, 41, 43, 90
Knibb, Michael A.	95–96	Scholem, G.	112	Winship, Michael P.	53
Kooijman, Jaap	14	Schwienhorst-Schönberger,		Wysocki, Jan	7
Kriss, Alexander	55, 57	Ludger	126		
Kristeva, Julia	15	Scott, James M.	94	XDestron	125
Krüger, T.	126	Scullion, Chris	19, 21–22, 26, 28–31, 34–35	York, J.	124
Langston, S.M.	69	Silcox, Mark	14		
Lavigne, C.	107, 110–111	Sinninghe Damsté,			
		Maurits J.	44		
Lundbom, Jack R.	61–62	Sisler, Vit	8		
		Snow Flesher, LeAnn	59		
Maier, Christl M.	59	Stripling, Scott	70		
Mandolfo, Carleen R.	59				
Marquardt, Friedrich-					
Wilhelm	42	Thompson, Michael	14		
Monkastery Studios	16	Tirrell, Jeffrey	38		
Morse, H.	118	Tomgar	125		
Moughtin-Mumby,		Triezenberg, Don	13		
Sharon	61				
		U/[deleted]	125		
Nickelsburg, G.	120	Uehlinger, C.	115		
Nogalski, James D.	75–76	Uris, Leon	69		
Nutt, Christian	31				
		Van Sant, Rebekah	94, 96–97		

COLOFON

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At first sight, Bible and video games may seem an unlikely pair. Yet the digital playground is teeming with explicit and subtle references to biblical stories, motifs, and theological themes. From *Bioshock Infinite* to *Cyberpunk 2077*, from the modest titles of *Wisdom Tree* to the vast worlds of *Mass Effect* and *Metro Exodus* - Scripture continues to resonate within today's interactive culture.

This volume represents the first major attempt to systematically explore the relationship between the Bible and video games. For the first time, insights from biblical studies and game studies are brought together in an interdisciplinary dialogue. The contributions examine, among other things:

- explicitly Christian "Bible games" and their theological implications;
- biblical motifs of exile, redemption, and resistance in popular franchises;

- the role of developers and players in shaping religious meaning;
- innovative pedagogical approaches in which the Bible is rediscovered through play.

Bible and Video Games demonstrates how sacred texts and digital worlds continually influence, challenge, and enrich one another. This volume not only charts an academic *terra incognita*, but also offers an invitation to further explore this emerging field of research.

With contributions from international experts in theology, biblical studies, and game studies, this volume is essential reading for anyone interested in religion, culture, and digital media.

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